

ONCE UPON AN ENCHANTMENT

BOOK I



DECEIVING THE CURSED BEAST



JEN LYNNING

Deceiving the Cursed Beast

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DECEIVING
THE
CURSED
BEAST

JEN LYNNING

Deceiving the Cursed Beast

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For all the people who think
sarcasm is the best way to flirt.



ONE

FELIX



MY HANDS RESTED on the handles of the pocket doors separating me from the great hall. I waited a moment, wanting to time my entrance perfectly, then slid the doors open. Too bad they couldn't slam against the wall. That would have been even better.

The doors might not have made much sound, but my heeled riding boots hitting the polished marble as I stepped into the great hall were still enough to make Cecily notice my presence. She froze, her eyes darting around the room until she spotted me.

"Lady Cecily," I drawled. I was probably taking a little too much pleasure in startling her, but I couldn't help it. "I didn't expect to find you wandering the halls of my home, I must say. You sounded quite certain that you never wanted to look upon my face again when you left last month."

She tucked a loose curl of blond hair behind her ear, but it wasn't the only one falling free of her pins. I'd never seen her so disheveled—even in bed. Which was one reason our affair hadn't lasted long. A woman who wouldn't allow a lover to muss her up wasn't of interest to me.

Lady Cecily was the type of woman to have every hair in place and a maid at her elbow, ready to pounce on any strands that dared to show a desire to break free. But no maid had accompanied her today. No footmen. Indeed, she hadn't taken a carriage to the manor, instead riding up alone on horseback. Had she thought to sneak in that way? For the first time, I was genuinely intrigued to hear what she had to say.

She squared her shoulders, lifting her chin high. "I still have no desire to see you, Felix."

I continued my slow journey across the great hall, drawing closer to the plinth in the center. The copper saucer filled with flames atop it had to

be Cecily's objective, though I couldn't understand what she thought she could do with the node. "It is strange, then, to find you in the heart of my demesne. Though it explains why you snuck in through the kitchens rather than waiting for Berklay at the front door."

She swallowed. "Indeed. I didn't want to bother anyone. Please, feel free to get back to your evening ride."

I stopped in front of the brazier, putting myself between Cecily and the pool of magic that resided inside the flames. "You paid close enough attention during your stay to know when I go for a ride every day, but still thought you could sneak up on the node unnoticed? I sensed it the moment you stepped onto castle grounds, Cecily."

Being the Lord of Truthhold brought with it nearly limitless power. Not because my title was duke. Political power was nothing compared to the strongest magical node on the continent. My ancestor had defied the limits of magic, not only locking the node to his bloodline, but imposing his will on the world and making anything he deemed true a reality. I wasn't the magical prodigy that my many-times-great grandfather had been, but I was the primary holder of the blood-tie to the node. Even monarchs knew they were no longer in control when they visited Truthhold. A contract signed and passed through the node could not be broken.

"I can banish you from Truthhold altogether," I continued. I snapped my fingers, the flourish unnecessary, but suiting my mood as I pulled on the magic and set the chandeliers within the great hall ablaze. "Tracking your movements all over the hillside is nothing."

Cecily flinched, but there were no longer any shadows to hide in. After a moment, she squared her shoulders, her eyes sliding off me and fastening on the flames over my shoulder. One deep breath later, she looked back at me. "It doesn't matter if you can track me. I had intended for you to wonder why misfortune befell you, but maybe this is better. Now you will know you only have yourself to blame."

I grinned, not trying to hide my amusement at all. "This should be entertaining. Please do explain."

She glared at me, and my smile only grew wider.

Her hand scrambled for her pocket, drawing out a folded piece of paper. She waved it under my nose. "I curse you, Felix Truthholder. You

lie and use people to your own ends. You care for no one but yourself. You will suffer for how you treat those around you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t believe for a minute that you would have been satisfied to sneak in here and not deliver that pretty speech.”

Cecily pushed past me, marching up to the copper basin. I let her. The node was locked to my bloodline; she couldn’t actually do anything with the power. Plus, I was too busy trying not to laugh to do much else. Curses were a thing of legend. Without access to the magic locked in the nodes scattered throughout the world, they simply required too much personal sacrifice for even the most powerful—and evil—of mages.

Cecily had a smidgeon of power, but that was all.

I watched her reach toward the flames with her bit of paper. She stopped well short, though the flames were magical in nature and gave off no heat. She looked back at me, and when she saw that I wasn’t going to try to stop her, she pulled her hand back all the way and unfolded the paper.

“Felix Truthholder,” she read, “I name you a beast in the form of a man. Let your nature show true. Until the day you learn to love, and find someone who admits their love for you though you cannot hide your true self, I curse you to wear the form of a beast as matches your heart.”

I lost the battle and laughed. I laughed so hard that tears streamed down my cheeks and I had to clutch at my side. That was her curse? She wasn’t trying to use her power at all, only the node’s. Not that her phrasing would work even if she had access to the node power. She should have at least used contractual language—not that I would have signed it—but at least her belief that the node could power her curse would have made sense then.

Cecily shrieked.

Through my laughter, I saw her thrust her hand into the center of the blaze. A halo of oranges, reds, and yellows wreathed her arm. For a moment, nothing else happened. I tried to catch my breath, intending to explain to my erstwhile lover exactly why her curse had failed.

Then the flames flared. The bit of paper glowed, and Cecily released it, stumbling away from the plinth.

I gaped as the familiar process of the node turning a bit of paper into a magically binding contract played out, even though I was the only person

who could initiate that process. Even though Cecily's curse wasn't a contract signed and witnessed.

Starting where the paper still floated, the flames began to change colors, turning dark violet. Soon the entire blaze was the same color, and the paper disappeared.

My eyes met Cecily's, and for a moment we stared, each as surprised as the other.

Then convulsions wracked my body, and I screamed.

TWO

ISABEL



“REALLY?” I GLARED at the heavens. Only a few puffy clouds interrupted the crystalline blue of the sky. “A perfect summer day? Just a hint of autumn in the air, preventing the sunshine from being unbearable? Tsy take it, we’ll only get a handful of days like this before the rains come, and today has to be one of them?”

I kicked at my skirts, the rocks in the road, anything. “How can I properly sulk with birds singing at me?”

Unsatisfied with kicking things—and tired of tripping myself—I grabbed a fallen branch and began whacking at the tall grass creeping onto the road. Under normal circumstances, the route between Leort and Rose Castle saw enough traffic to beat the grass back. Then, two months ago, a flood of castle workers had arrived in town with no explanation, declaring the castle closed to visitors until further notice. No one had traveled it since.

“Almost no one,” I corrected my thoughts aloud and threw the stick into the verge. I had always preferred to vent my frustrations verbally rather than physically. It didn’t matter that no one but the birds and the gods could hear me now.

“He had to try for a big score, didn’t he?” I found another pebble and kicked it down the road. “I know, I know. He always wants to do something bigger. Even with me working with the constables and Sofia with the magistrates, he still thinks he can get away with being a thief.”

I thought I had come to terms with my father’s disrespect for the law years ago, but this time, he had gone too far. He had no right to drag me into his problems.

“You’d think he’d realize that—even with all the rumors—a castle brimming with magic wouldn’t be an easy target, wouldn’t you?”

A lark trilled from a nearby tree, and I shook my finger at it. “You’d be wrong.” I imitated my father’s gruff voice. “It should have been a quick in and out, Isabel. The duke sent everyone away. I figured he was dying. Or dead. The castle was as good as empty.”

I threw my hands up in the air, startling another bird into flight. “The castle sits on a damn node and is the home of a duke! Even if the craziest rumors were true—and even those never went so far as to claim the duke was dead—Father never had a chance of stealing anything.”

I savored my rage, not telling even the birds my real problem. If I admitted it, despair might take over the rage, and I refused to arrive at the castle blotchy and teary-eyed. It would send the wrong impression.

I had every intention of delivering a tongue-lashing once I reached the duke, and such things were more effective if the deliverer looked calm and mature. Poise lent tongue-lashings more weight. Tears made them sound like the product of a girl throwing a fit.

Luckily for me, I had plenty to be angry about. The final mile of my walk, I focused my energy on my father. I alternated between cursing his ego and calling him every word for stupid I knew. Experience had given me quite a selection.

The birds ignored my tirade, and I ignored their damned, cheerful singing.

My litany of insults trailed off when I crested one of the taller hills in the area and caught sight of Rose Castle. Truthhold was situated in a stretch of hilly land surrounded on three sides by mountains. The castle perched at the peak of the next hill over, not quite centered, with the ridges of the Gaboor Mountains behind. Constructed out of pale pink granite, people had named the manor Rose Castle shortly after it was built. Then the magic pooling in the Truthholder node intervened. Now Rose Castle truly lived up to its name. Technically a manor house, it had a tower at each corner that fit the term castle well enough. But it was the rose part where the magic had truly taken over.

I couldn’t see a single patch of the pink stone as I walked down my hill toward the castle. The sun hadn’t quite sunk behind the mountains in the west, the most distant stretch of the Gaboors from where I stood, and the light was enough to illuminate the briars covering every inch of the castle walls. Scarlet, pink, yellow, orange, and white blooms alternated

with the deep green of the vines. The facade looked more like a tapestry woven from the castle's namesake plant than a stone wall.

The breeze carried the sweet scent of roses all the way to the base of the hill. For a moment, I stopped, my anger and hopelessness fading. Under any other circumstances, walking up to the castle doors would have left me gaping.

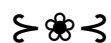
Even without the ability to sense the power in the air, how had my father overlooked the magic permeating this place? Usually, I had to concentrate to sense magic, and could still only catch it under very specific circumstances, but here, so many trickles of power joined together that it shivered over my skin, the vibration of a sound too low to hear.

I concentrated on that energy, trying to hear it. Instead, I felt the power twined around my torso pulling tighter. I rubbed at my sternum, wishing I could ease the pressure. I took another step, but even that didn't satisfy the magic at this point. Perhaps the sensation wouldn't be so strong if my father had told me what he had done the instant he returned to Leort last night, instead of spending the evening in a tavern and staggering home after I was in bed.

I hadn't understood the tug of the magic when it first wrapped around me. This morning, the pressure had been almost unbearable. Then my father stumbled downstairs and told me I had to go to Rose Castle because of a contract he signed in order to save his own hide after getting caught trying to rob the duke. Magic bound me to fulfill the terms of a contract I hadn't even seen.

It should have been impossible for my father to sign away my freedom. I was an adult. Father had lost his legal authority over me years ago. But somehow, I was still bound by this contract.

With every step up the hillside, a little more of my wonder at the beauty of Rose Castle was replaced by indignation. My father wasn't the only one at fault in this situation. Since I hadn't had the time to yell at him, the duke would bear the brunt of my anger. I refused to let my awe of the castle and the magic suffusing the hillside affect me.



I DIDN'T BOTHER to knock at the doors of the castle. I knew there was no butler here to welcome me. The people of Leort had tried for weeks to get Master Berklay to explain why he, the handful of servants, and the passel

of clerks who lived in the castle had left. The butler only said the duke wanted solitude. The clerks and secretaries could do their jobs just as well in Leort.

Even my mentor among the constables—who happened to be Berklay's brother—couldn't get a straight answer. I had been too busy to devote any time to satisfying my curiosity.

I looked at the brass doorknob. For the first time in my life, I wished I wasn't about to have my questions answered. I'd take not knowing over this forced excursion to Rose Castle.

I threw open the doors, the tug of magic directing me inside. Candles flicked to life in the sconces on the walls as I walked into the foyer. If my father had even a lick of sense, he'd have fled the instant the first candle lit on its own. I certainly wanted to flee. But I couldn't.

The magic pulled me deeper into the castle. Two doors stood open across from me, leading to a large, mostly empty room. I crossed into what had to be the great hall. No candles came to life here. The only light came from the large brazier in the center of the space. Slightly longer than it was wide, the room lacked any other ornamentation. Nothing but that marble pillar topped with a copper bowl of fire.

The flames licked back and forth, reflecting off the marble floor but not illuminating the entire room. Shadows danced along the perimeter in time with the flickers from the brazier. The phantom movements left me uneasy. The tug of power around my torso had stopped once I reached the node, but I didn't know what I was doing here. Nor could I shake the feeling that someone hid in the shadows, darting from corner to corner.

I closed my eyes and concentrated. Raw magic flowed toward the brazier from every direction. Rivers of power all pooling inside the flames that seemed too small to contain the torrent. Despite the emptiness of the room, I felt crowded by the power pulsing around me.

The energy emanating from the node sounded like nothing I had ever experienced. My magic manifested as sounds, bells I heard in my mind when people spoke. Raw magic hummed at a pitch just at the edge of my magical range. The vibration of the power from the node, on the other hand, resonated in my bones, the hum growing louder the longer I listened. It sounded like shaped power, brimming with the potential to do any truth-magic imagined.

"Miss Sofia Cardh."

My eyes snapped open, and I spun toward the source of the deep voice. I saw nothing in the flickering light. My response came by rote, a sing-songy refrain I had uttered countless times over the years. “Wrong twin. Try again.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m not Sofia.” I squinted into the shadows, wondering if the empty room played tricks with acoustics, making it seem like the voice came out of the floor itself. I still saw nothing. “You have the wrong twin.”

“Impossible. The contract your father signed clearly stated he would send me his younger daughter, Sofia.”

“Well, there’s your problem. Sofia beat me into the world by a good five minutes.”

“But she’s . . . you’re not . . .”

“I’m not . . .?” I had heard it all before. I never came out ahead when compared to my sister—except in stubbornness. Sofia was so sweet and kind that I didn’t even resent my twin after spending years listening to recitations of my own shortcomings.

The owner of the bass voice—who must be Duke Felix, though I wasn’t willing to rule out this castle having enchanted, talking floors—didn’t name any of my flaws, though. He settled on a heartfelt curse. “I had to be clever and say ‘younger daughter.’ I couldn’t just name Sofia, because there are ways of changing names. Idiot.”

I had to bite my tongue, but I managed not to voice my own opinion on his intelligence.

“Well,” he continued, “at least you are a mage with a truth-magic, too. It’s not a complete loss.”

“In fact, I am the more powerful mage.” Modesty came near the top of the list of traits Sofia possessed in greater abundance than I. Right under agreeableness and discretion. Not calling the duke an idiot had stretched the limits of my tact for the next month, at least.

“But you, Miss Isabel Cardh, are a truth-reader. I wanted a truth-teller.”

“As if you need either power here.”

“Normally, no,” the duke drawled. “However, things are a bit strange at the moment.”

“Really? The empty castle and disembodied voice didn’t clue me into that at all. Not to mention your disregard for legalities in order to kidnap

me.”

“My voice isn’t disembodied. It is more . . . mis-embodied. And I assure you the contract only worked because it technically adheres to legalities. Besides, I see it as more of a recruitment than a kidnapping.”

“Recruitment implies choice. This was a conscription at best.” I wanted to expound on my chastisements, but I had to ask, “What do you mean by mis-embodied?”

“Well.” He cleared his throat, then fell silent.

“Well?”

“You know there is a non-disclosure clause in the contract your father signed?”

“I do now.” Father hadn’t told me any more than the fact that he had signed a contract that had allowed him to go free in return for me traveling to Rose Castle. The power enforcing that contract hadn’t given me the time to question him more fully. It hadn’t given me time to do anything but throw a change of clothes into a bag and go.

“You can’t tell anybody.”

I rolled my eyes. “I understand what non-disclosure means. Get on with it.”

“I’ve been cursed into another form.” Each word came faster than the last.

I repeated the sentence in my head, making sure I hadn’t mixed anything up. It still made no sense. “What do you mean, another form? And cursed? Curses don’t exist.”

“That’s what I thought, too. Circumstances have changed my mind.”

I opened my mouth, ready to demand an answer that actually explained anything, when I noticed for the first time that my power lay dormant. I could still hear the pure tone of the node if I concentrated, but nothing else. My eyes widened. “I can’t tell if you are lying!”

I heard no bells signaling the truth of anything he said. Unlike truth-telling, my power always remained in effect. If a person spoke in my vicinity, then I sensed if they spoke the truth, a shading of the truth, or a lie. Musical bells underscored truths, klaxons identified lies, and variations in harmony showed me the shades in between. But I heard nothing under the duke’s words.

“Of course not.” The duke clearly shared my level of modesty. “My tie to the node gives me immunity to your power.”

“But the node is locked to truth-telling, not truth-reading.” I thought back over my lessons in basic history and magical theory. When within a certain distance of the node, the duke’s blood-tie essentially made him a mage with the same power as had been used to lock the node. “You should only be immune to that power.”

Technically, even then, he didn’t have true immunity. A truth-teller simply needed more power than the duke to affect him. It was the same for all mages with the same type of magic. I could only read another truth-reader if they had less power. I had never encountered anyone I couldn’t read before. But no mage had more power than a node.

“They are both truth-magics.” The duke’s voice slipped back into that lazy drawl. “Truth-telling is stronger, so my immunity makes sense.”

I crossed my arms, guessing as best I could where to direct my glare. “You cannot possibly believe that drivel that active powers are more powerful than their passive counterparts? They are two sides of the same coin—different, but equal.”

“Do you really think that knowing a storm is coming is as good as being able to divert the storm?”

“It’s the difference between being proactive and reactive.” I warmed to the argument. Reason replaced outrage. “Knowing to take shelter before a storm strikes is far better than being able to banish the rain after you’ve already been caught unaware.”

“The weather-changer can learn mundane ways of predicting the weather and still be proactive. The reader will never be able to alter the weather, though.”

I scoffed. The duke’s argument was true—except that most active-power mages shared his disdain for passive powers. “How many weather-changers will take the time to learn how to predict the weather, pay attention to the signs, and never make a mistake? The weather-reader might never be able to stop rain, but they will always know what is coming and never make a mistake. Your attitude is short-sighted at best.”

I crossed my arms, then realized we had drifted far off topic. I couldn’t even place all the blame on the duke. I huffed out a breath. “No wonder you wanted Sofia instead of me. If you really think passive powers are useless, you might as well release me and I’ll be on my way.”

“Oh no, you are going to help me break this curse.” The duke chuckled. “It should be no problem for you, since you think your power is

better.”

“I never said that.”

“And I never said truth-telling is stronger.”

My jaw dropped, my arms falling to my sides. “Yes, you did!”

“Well, I didn’t mean it.”

“You didn’t . . .” My hands curled into fists. “It is no surprise somebody cursed you. I want to curse you.”

“Too bad. You are contractually obligated to help me to the best of your ability.”

I strained my eyes, but I still couldn’t spot the duke in the flickering light. He said he wasn’t disembodied, but what form had he taken? I wanted to know, but understanding my own predicament took priority. I’d allowed the duke to sweep me into a pointless debate for too long. “How does that even work? My father doesn’t have the authority to sign for me.”

“Actually, he does. While women have been granted full legal status, there is still an old law on the books detailing the hierarchy of male next of kin from before. Since you are unmarried, your father has the legal authority to sign in your name.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I am the legal master of my own life, even if that law wasn’t repealed. My autonomy supersedes any rights my father might have.”

“For practical purposes, certainly. A magistrate would rule in your favor without hesitation. But as far as the magic of the node is concerned, your father’s signature is legally binding.”

I knew several magistrates who would probably hesitate, despite the clarity of the laws. Powerful positions in Leort were filled almost entirely by hide-bound misogynists. It was why I had given up on my dream of working as an advocate. The magistrates would never let me argue cases. They’d only ever see me as a secretary who could double as a truth-detector. I had instead pursued a job with the constables.

Chief Nassan might not think that women could handle the rigors of enforcing the law, but I had Frederic and a few other of the men on my side. After years of proving myself over and over again, the balance was shifting. At least, it had been before I’d been forced to leave town without a word.

I added Duke Felix to my list of men who didn’t deserve their power. Though I was willing to admit that his issue probably wasn’t my sex. He

simply had no compunction against exploiting a loophole in the law. “I think I might hate you.”

The duke chuckled. “I can respect that. Evidence suggests you aren’t the first to feel that way.”

“Ah yes, your curse. Are you ever going to explain what you meant about being mis-embodied? I promise not to scream upon seeing your cursed form.”

“I doubt a scream will be your first reaction,” he muttered.

There was a ripple in the shadows where his voice had come from. At first I thought the movement was a shadow itself, then I noticed the details. Four legs. A tail.

He was right; I felt no temptation to scream. I clapped a hand over my mouth, stifling my laughter.

THREE

FELIX



“GO AHEAD. LAUGH.” I sighed.

When I first woke up after Cecily cursed me, I hadn’t understood what had happened. I couldn’t sit up; my arms and legs felt all wrong. Then I glimpsed the fur. What I could remember of her curse made me fear the worst, but the truth was even more embarrassing. I wasn’t a fearsome beast.

I was a fluffy, black cat. There were patches of white fur on my front paws and at the base of my throat. I was a tad larger than the average house cat, but nothing out of the ordinary.

“It was an exceptionally poorly worded curse,” I told Isabel, who was biting her lip, but not laughing in my face.

Under normal circumstances, I’d be distracted by watching her teeth sink into those pink lips. Isabel was pretty in the best way, all round and soft with the types of curves that starred in my dreams. Her hair was a rich chestnut brown and cut in a short style that framed her face, with none of the ridiculous pins and ribbons most women insisted on. I didn’t even mind her sharp tongue. In fact, I enjoyed it.

But circumstances were far from normal right now. Though I noticed her, I didn’t have room for thoughts about anything other than my current predicament.

“What did he intend to do?” she asked, her voice choked. “Try to make you more cuddly?”

“She,” I corrected. “She intended to turn me into a beast. Something about me being heartless and wanting outsides to match insides. I’m not sure how it resulted in this.”

“Heartless? I would have gone with amoral.”

The tip of my tail twitched. Cecily's accusations hadn't bothered me. Though I understood Isabel's anger—I was even enjoying riling her to some extent—I wasn't keen on being seen as amoral. I had crossed a line signing that contract with her father, but it had been necessary. In the two months since I was cursed, I hadn't come close to figuring out how to reverse my condition.

Then Edwin Cardh tried to sneak into my castle. He told me a sob story about having two daughters waiting for him back home—conveniently forgetting to mention their ages—and I recognized the names. I was a duke with a blood-tie to a node locked to truth-magic. Isabel and Sofia were mages with truth powers in the closest town to my castle. I had heard about them for years. When I went to town, someone inevitably pointed the twins out to me.

Everyone assumed that any woman with truth-magic must be of interest to me. Given what had happened with Cecily, I'd rather avoid dealing with another truth-mage entirely, but I needed one.

Getting Sofia out to Rose Castle had been too great of an opportunity to miss. I couldn't just invite her. Not without a contract already in place guaranteeing her silence. It wasn't my transformation that needed to be kept secret, it was what that transformation portended. Cecily had used my node. Only people with Truthholder blood should have any access to the node. If the blood-lock had weakened—or even broken—then that was a much bigger issue than me spending the rest of my life as a cat.

It would be the start of a second round of node wars.

So, while I felt guilty for using a legal technicality to bring Isabel to Rose Castle, if there was any chance she could help me figure out what had happened, I had to take it. She probably wouldn't be able to reverse the curse, since she wasn't a truth-teller like Cecily, but she was still a mage.

"Amoral is a bit harsh," I said, pretending her indictment didn't really bother me. "I simply have different priorities than you."

"Like prioritizing your life over mine. Speaking of which, I need to get back to mine as soon as possible. What exactly did my father bind me to do?"

"Everything in your power to help me until my curse is broken."

"Please say he didn't." Her shoulders slumped and her voice lost its resolve. "He wouldn't—"

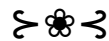
She choked on the next word. The entire hillside was under a truth-telling enchantment. I was immune to the magic, but Isabel couldn't say her father wouldn't sign such a vague contract, exchanging his daughter for his own freedom. He would. He had.

She coughed, squaring her shoulders once more. "I want to see this contract."

"Certainly. I'll have Marc pull it for you tomorrow morning. For now, why don't you get settled in your room? I can prepare a supper tray for you. I'm sure you are tired after walking all the way from Leort."

She didn't ask who Marc was, or how I could prepare a supper tray, and I was surprised to find I wanted her to ask. Perhaps she really was tired from her journey. Or perhaps learning just how horrible the terms of the contract were for her was one disappointment too many.

She held out a hand, palm up. "Lead the way, Your Grace."



ISABEL HADN'T SAID anything else as I led the way upstairs and to the largest guest suite. She closed the door in my face, but I could see her shoes right on the other side of the door. She had her back pressed against it, relying on it for support as everything that had happened crashed over her.

I knew the feeling. A good meal and sleep would help, but it wouldn't solve the problem.

Tugging on several of the threads of magic that floated all over the hillside, I summoned a tray of food—and a bottle of wine—that would appear in her sitting room. I had already eaten my supper, and it wasn't actually that late, so I returned to my tower.

My suite connected to the northwest tower on the second floor. My bedroom filled the circular room on that level, with a staircase leading up to the third and fourth floors. No door connected the tower to the rest of the third floor, and only the towers had a fourth floor. The tower used to be my sanctuary. I'd escape for a few hours every week to read in the top level, or just work in my study on the third floor when I didn't want to deal with interruptions.

For the past two months, interruptions hadn't been a problem. The only other person—or, I suppose, the only human—in the castle until now had been the single secretary I kept to help me scour the archives. My tower was no longer a sanctuary but a source of frustration. It didn't

matter how many hours I spent here, reading through the journals of my ancestors, I couldn't find any answers.

I settled into my now usual spot on top of the desk in my study and used another wisp of power to call in a journal. The first Duke of Truthhold hadn't left any records, unless you counted the scores of contracts he passed through the node after locking it. No one really understood how he had made it so that the node magically enforced contracts. I had tried reading his son's journals, but while they recounted several feats I could accomplish by using node power, they didn't really explain why the Truths, as Sebastien referred to them, worked.

I knew how to make a meal appear out of thin air, summon a book from the library, and open doors without the help of hands, but reading Sebastien's journals hadn't helped me understand how Cecily had used the power of the node to curse me. If my family's genealogical records were any less complete, I might suspect she had a smidgeon of Truthholder blood herself. Though she still wouldn't have the primary tie to the node, allowing her to enforce a contract. Nor had she shown any sign of manipulating the node's magic before she cursed me.

Still, it was worth investigating if a member of the family could be cut out of the blood-tie. I called in Duchess Maelle's journals. Despite being a younger child and female, she had inherited the duchy in an age when the rest of the kingdom still practiced primogeniture. The heir to Truthhold had to sign a contract guaranteeing certain behaviors, otherwise he—or she—could not claim the title. Maelle's brother had thought to ignore this law, since he only had a sister to challenge his claim.

When their father died, Maelle inherited the primary-node tie. Her brother didn't give up without a fight, though. Hopefully her journals would confirm the story that she eventually resorted to stripping him of his tie to the node entirely. And explain how I could do the same to Cecily. It wouldn't answer the question of how she had gained access to the node power in the first place, but it was better than nothing.

I pored over Maelle's journals for hours, finding nothing. Mostly, she wrote about the negotiations she presided over, rarely mentioning anything about her personal life. It was a very different read than Duke Sebastien's journals. I still had another journal to flip through when I stopped for the night. It was past midnight, and I needed to be alert tomorrow to deal with my new guest.

Instinctively, I turned my senses toward Isabel. The node power that permeated every inch of the castle allowed me to pinpoint her location. I would have noticed if she had left the castle grounds—not that the contract would allow her to—but otherwise I had to concentrate to sense her location.

She was in the bedroom I had given her, probably having nightmares about the monster who had dragged her away from her home and life.

FOUR

ISABEL



WHEN I HAD left home, I hadn't known what awaited me at Rose Castle. My father hadn't told me much of anything. I had known that even in the best-case scenario, I'd be staying at least one night. Leort was the closest town to the duke's home, and much of our size and prestige owed itself to our association with Truthhold, but it was still a full day's walk. The town had been built based on geographic advantages, like the river that led into central Nemya. The castle had been built to take advantage of the node and the node only.

This was not a sought-after area to establish villages. There weren't any rivers nearby, the land was rocky, and the dragons roosting in the Gaboor mountains made most people nervous—though they rarely ventured far from the jagged peaks of the mountains. Altogether, it meant that a journey to Rose Castle from Leort didn't include any villages on the way.

Therefore, even with the magic pulling at me, I had taken the time to grab a heel of bread and a bit of sausage for my journey and pack a single change of clothes. I donned that clean outfit now, wondering what I'd do tomorrow. Perhaps I could clean the dust from the skirt I had worn the day before without ruining the fabric, but I didn't have much confidence. I took my clothes to a laundry house back in Leort, and there were no maids to clean my dirty clothes here.

I laced up my bodice and sighed. Even if I could get my clothes clean and wrinkle free, I'd still look dingy compared to my surroundings. Not that my simple linen blouse and wool skirt and bodice weren't respectable garments, the type found in the closet of any middle-class woman in Leort, but the guest suite was more than respectable.

I exited the bedroom and stopped short. I hadn't given the sitting room much attention the night before. When the duke showed me the room, I had practically slammed the door in his face. Then I had collapsed against it as the hopelessness of my predicament had settled into my gut. Based on what His Grace had said, my father hadn't even tried to negotiate any limits to my work for the duke. I hoped that, when I read the actual contract, I'd find something. If His Grace was stuck with me instead of Sofia, then maybe there were other instances of sloppy wordings I could exploit.

After I had recovered enough to straighten from the door, I had crossed the sitting room without really looking. I had noticed the tray of food, and been tempted by the bottle of wine, but in the end, I had decided that collapsing in bed would do me more good.

Now I inspected the room fully, my mouth gaping as I took it all in. While the bedroom had a certain sort of splendor, the sitting room was extravagant.

Damask chairs, spindly tables, and assorted ornaments made of gold, silver, and porcelain filled every inch. I looked down at my wool skirt, then up at the lace—lace!—curtains on the window. Who wasted yards of lace to make curtains? Who wanted curtains that did nothing to block the light?

The room made no sense. Even for a *sitting* room, it had too many seats. A dozen people could sit on the various settees and chairs. If they could get to them through the maze of tables. I must have been even more overwhelmed than I had realized last night not to notice the clutter. And luckier than I realized that I hadn't tripped and broken my neck.

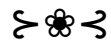
In a way, I felt better about my own clothes after studying the room. Even the queen's finest gown would look inferior here. And even the shabbiest rags would look more tasteful.

My twin would be in raptures over the room, seeing each item as the expensive work of art it was and ignoring the disjointed design of the whole. Thinking of Sofia burned away the last of my wonder. I hadn't even managed to leave a message for her before I left. She'd be worried sick by now.

I picked my way across the room, once more ignoring the silver tray balanced precariously on a skinny table between priceless knickknacks. It

had changed from what I remembered the night before, the wine replaced with a pot of tea and several cups, the plate of food fresh.

My stomach grumbled, but I needed answers more than food. I planned to extract those answers from the duke no matter how much he tried to steer the conversation off topic. Even Chief Nassan admitted that no one could question a suspect as effectively as me.



I HAD NO idea where to find a small cat in a large castle, so I began a systematic check. More guest rooms lined both sides of my hall. The suites on either side of mine had similar spacious dimensions made smaller by over-furnishing. On the interior side of the hall, smaller bedrooms filled the space and, if anything, held even more furniture.

I closed the final door of this the hall and turned the corner, nearly stepping on the duke's tail.

He twitched it out of the way at the last moment, while I teetered on one foot, trying not to step on a peer of the realm. The ridiculousness of the situation hit me, and I had to bite my lip, much as I had the night before, not to laugh at the duke. If I wasn't careful, I was going to try to scratch him under his chin or scoop him in my arms before I remembered who he was. He was such a . . . floof.

Then he spoke, that incongruously deep voice and bored drawl reminding me that he was not cuddly in the least. "Looking for something?"

"If I were, I'm certain it is in one of these rooms. Not that I'd ever find it. Do your guests generally like tripping over something with every step?"

His whiskers vibrated. "It makes them feel important."

"It annoys me."

"Hmm, then you must not be important, Miss Cardh."

I snorted. "Or I recognize my own importance and therefore don't need five ormolu clocks to bolster my ego."

One black ear twitched. "Five?"

I pointed at the offending room. "Two on the mantle, two more on side tables, and one on the windowsill."

"You can always change rooms if yours doesn't have enough clocks."

I gave the duke a look that made most men stammer and make their excuses as quickly as possible. It was more fun that way than pointing out that I wasn't my twin and watching them flee just as quickly.

The duke was either made of sterner stuff than the men of Leort or he had a warped sense of humor. He chuckled. "Seriously, then. Were you looking for anything in particular?"

"Not anymore. I have a few questions for you."

"Right now? It is barely past sunrise. I haven't even had breakfast." He unwrapped his fluffy tail from around his paws and rose, sauntering down the hall I had just come from.

I followed him back to the stairs he had led me up the night before. "Then why are you out wandering the halls?"

"To discover why you had decided to poke your nose in every room."

"You knew what I was doing?"

He glanced back at me. "Are these really the questions you wanted to ask?"

"Not originally, but I don't put a limit on the number of questions I ask. Every answer can help, and I never know which questions will turn out to be the critical ones, Your Grace."

"I didn't arrange for a mage to come to my home so she could badger me with questions. You are supposed to use your power to break my curse."

I let him get several steps in front of me before following him down the stairs. "If I'm to have any chance of success, I need more information. So, I will start by asking questions."

"Fine." The duke sighed as he led the way to the nearest door. "But I want to at least get some breakfast while you pester me."

The door stood slightly ajar, and he slipped inside without waiting for a response. I pushed the door open wider and saw a surprisingly simple dining room. The duke was already halfway to the far end of the table. As I watched, he reached the end and hopped up in front of the chair placed at the head of the table. He nodded at the chair to his right.

I glanced at the seven other seats, but saw no reason not to take the chair he had indicated. I sat down, then jumped when a bowl of porridge materialized in front of the duke. Concentrating, I heard the chime of node power when he twitched his paw and a pot of tea with four cups appeared next.

The duke narrowed his eyes at the empty cups. “I can call a full mug for myself no problem, but if I want a pot, the cups come empty.”

I reached for the teapot and poured two cups. I remembered the four cups on the tray in my sitting room. “I take it you can’t change the number of cups that come with the pot, either?”

“No. A pot of tea comes with four cups.”

I pushed one full teacup toward the duke.

“Thank you, Miss Cardh.”

The duke lapped at his breakfast, and I felt another bubble of laughter rising up. I needed somewhere else to look while I questioned him. I propped one elbow on the table, resting my chin in my hand. “Do you usually dine in front of your guests—and I use that word in the loosest definition possible—without offering them anything more than tea?”

He lifted his head, a bit of porridge in the fur around his mouth. “Couldn’t hold off on your questions long enough to enjoy your own breakfast, I take it?”

“Or maybe I couldn’t find a path to the tray through all the clutter.”

“Clutter! Only worthless items are clutter. My guest rooms are decorated with priceless ornaments.”

I concentrated, catching the quick succession of node magics that rang out as the duke called in toast, fruit, a second bowl of porridge, and two types of juice. I lifted a slice of toast. “Junk.”

“Antiques.”

“Do you even know what is in the guest rooms?”

His ear twitched. “Not a clue.”

I almost smiled. Catching myself, I instead took a large bite of the toast. The duke held me at his castle under duress. I shouldn’t enjoy bantering with him.

The toast was delicious, golden brown and dripping with butter. The fruits were sweet and juicy. I took a few minutes to focus on my breakfast. And all the reasons I hated the duke. Once I reinforced my opinion of him as a selfish ass, I resumed my quest to get answers.

“You said ‘she’ last night.” I poured myself a second cup of tea. “Who is the woman who cursed you?”

“Lady Cecily of Finley. The baron’s youngest child.”

I only had the vaguest knowledge of geography outside Leort’s immediate environs. I could find the capital city of Haiwella and a few

other towns on a map, but I had no idea where Finley was. Not that it mattered.

“How do you know Lady Cecily?”

“She stayed at Rose Castle for about a month this past spring.”

“And what was her purpose here?” It required all my training with the constables to keep my expression mild. I hadn’t expected to drag the entire story out question by question. Usually, I let suspects ramble for a while, then asked clarifying questions based on what they had already revealed. Most people wanted to talk. Even the guilty ones tended to say too much, thinking their lies were better than silence.

The duke had no difficulty keeping his answers short. “To become the next Duchess of Truthhold, naturally.”

“Naturally.” I mimicked the duke’s drawl. “She stayed for an entire month. Was she close to achieving her aim, oblivious, or obstinate?”

“Misguided.”

I clenched my jaw. “In what way?”

“She was under the impression that worming her way into my bed meant a betrothal was on the way.”

“Did you send her away at the end of the month, or did she come to her senses and flee?” As a constable, I would never ask the question in such a way, but I wasn’t here as a constable. Besides, I couldn’t help myself.

The duke ignored my phrasing. “I devoted considerable effort to convincing her that a betrothal was not in our future and she finally chose to leave.”

“What was her mood upon departure?”

“Well, she came back a month later and cursed me, so probably not positive.”

I took a deep breath and imagined Frederic, my mentor among the constables, was standing at my side. He questioned people without the aid of truth-reading all the time. I could handle this. “I meant her immediate reaction, Your Grace. How did Lady Cecily react when she realized you had no intention of marrying her?”

He heaved an exaggerated sigh. “She understandably spiraled into the blackest of depressions upon learning she could not have me.”

I pushed away from the table and paced toward the far end. If the duke answered my questions seriously, that might be one thing, but as it was, I

needed my power to sift through his answers. It was more than a matter of differentiating truths from lies. Especially when I couldn't even rely on body language to judge the nuances.

"This is pointless," I complained when I turned back to face the duke. "I can't learn anything from you without my power."

The duke joined me, his soft paws silent on the table's surface. "I'm answering your questions, aren't I? Even though they have nothing to do with the actual curse. What more do you want, Miss Cardh?"

"I want to know if you are telling the truth." I spun to face him. "Though an enchantment prevents me from lying while at Rose Castle, I know you can. You did it last night."

"Indeed. I have an exceptionally strong affinity to the node, and I am immune to even its spells—unless I sign a contract or someone curses me. However, I am not lying to you about Cecily. I don't understand the point of your questions, but I will not ruin whatever slim chance there is that my answers help you break the curse."

"Truth isn't black and white, Your Grace." I paced back up the room, the duke staying by my side as he walked over the table. "I'm used to hearing more than simply if a person is lying to me. I can tell when a statement is one truth meant to distract from another, or when an uncomfortable truth is hidden behind a sarcastic comment. My power is far more subtle than your node's interpretation of the truth. Nor am I naïve enough to believe that you couldn't manage to twist words around in such a way as to lie to me even if you were subjected to the truth-telling enchantment."

"How cynical you are, Miss Cardh."

"Realistic."

"Realistically, then, it is in my best interest to be honest with you. I'll admit, habit might prevent me from speaking the whole truth, but all you need to do is prompt me. Or ask if you think I am shading the truth somehow."

"And the sarcasm?"

The duke lifted a paw, grooming his whiskers. "That, you'll have to deal with. However, since I doubt you'll have any hesitation in simply asking me the same thing over and over, I'm sure you'll manage."

"Fine." I pulled out the nearest chair and sat down. "Tell me exactly how Lady Cecily reacted when she discovered you wouldn't marry her."

“She called me a heartless monster, told me she never wanted to see me again, then hid in her rooms until she departed for Finley the next morning.”

“No threats?”

“None. She sounded more upset that I had ‘led her on,’ as she put it, than that I didn’t want to marry her. She felt she had wasted a month.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Did you lead her on?”

“Depends on your perspective.”

My fingers curled into my palm, my nails pressing against the skin hard enough to leave marks. “Now would be one of those times I want the whole truth, Your Grace.”

He sank down on the table, stretched out in front of me. His black fur contrasted starkly with the pale wood. “I did not intentionally lead her on. There was an understanding when I invited her to Rose Castle that I might be evaluating her as a prospective bride, but I tried to make it clear early on that I had reconsidered that idea.”

“But you still slept with her.”

The duke sighed. “I thought I had made my position clear by the time she sought out my bed. I thought we both understood it was a physical relationship and nothing more.”

“Well, now I at least understand her motive.” I still wished I could hear the truth of the duke’s statements with my magic so I could judge how much of what he said was fact and how much wishful thinking. In this case, though, it didn’t truly matter, for it was obvious Cecily hadn’t shared his opinion. Now it was time to focus on the next aspect of my investigation. “How did she power the curse?”

“If I knew the answer to that, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Why don’t we pretend for a minute that I know nothing about Lady Cecily or what happened? Anything you tell me, therefore, will be a surprise, even if it is obvious to you. Oh wait, we don’t have to pretend; it’s the truth!”

“Sarcasm, Miss Cardh? Isn’t that beneath you?”

“If you get to be sarcastic, then so do I. Deal with it. Now, walk me through exactly what happened when she cursed you.”

To my surprise, he did. Duke Felix recounted the entire event without the need for prompting. He even included a wealth of details, such as exact

locations and tones of voice. Not that I believed his interpretations to be fact, but it was much better than nothing.

“What were the exact words of the curse?” I asked when he finished.

“I’m not positive. Something about being a beast and showing my true nature. She also said that I would stay cursed until someone fell in love with me while I’m a beast, I think.” His tail swished back and forth over the polished table. “I did my best to remember the exact wording after I recovered from the transformation. The secretary who stayed to help me wrote it down. I’ll have Marc copy it over for you, along with the contract your father signed, but I doubt it will be exact.”

I didn’t have the faintest idea how I would—or even could—go about breaking the curse, but at least I knew my immediate next step. “Where do I find Marc?”

“At this hour? Probably still in bed.” He rose to all fours. “Why don’t you take the morning to get settled? I’ll introduce you to Marc at the midday meal. We eat at noon in this room.”

FIVE

ISABEL



I IGNORED THE duke's ridiculous suggestion to do nothing all morning. Not only did I not want to waste time and be forced to stay in the castle a minute longer than necessary, but I also could not stand by idly while the node's magic pushed me to fulfill my portion of the contract.

Break the curse.

Until I read the contract, that was all I had to work with. Wonderful. I made my way back to the great hall, where the incongruously small node dominated the space. There was so much power packed into those flames. Enough, apparently, to turn a man into a cat. Enough to enforce a contract anywhere in the world, once it was enchanted.

Contracts.

The node made contracts magically binding. Lady Cecily had written out her curse and passed it through the node, as well. If I wanted to break the curse, the first tools I needed were pen and paper.

I spotted a door at the far end of the great hall and made my way across the room. The doors whispered open, and I found myself in a large room that could have been another dining room. Tall windows ran along the back wall, with two tables running perpendicular to the wall and a short third table connecting them at the end closest to the great hall. Unlike in a dining room, however, chairs had only been placed on one side of each table, the outside of the U formed by all three.

A room for meetings and negotiations ought to have the writing supplies I needed. I made my way around the tables, pausing for a moment to enjoy the view out the windows. The hill the castle sat on sloped away below me, the land rising and falling beyond until the hills gave way to the Gaboor Mountains. Far in the distance, I could see the outline of a dragon flying near one of the peaks.

Reluctantly, I turned my attention to the credenza beneath the window. I found the paper, pens, and ink I needed and stacked them into a neat pile. I carried them into the great hall, then realized I should have made use of the table in the negotiation room. The power wrapped around me felt looser next to the node, however, so I settled on the marble floor, uncapped the inkwell, and dipped my pen. On the first sheet of paper, I wrote *Felix Truthholder will take the form of a man*. I tore off the top of the paper and stood.

I hesitated for a moment, but the flames gave off no heat. They looked real, but they weren't. At least, they weren't real fire. They were pure magic, their power thrumming over me.

Lady Cecily had held her curse to the flames and come to no harm. I could do this. I shoved my hand into the flames.

Nothing happened. The power of the node didn't waver.

I sat on the floor again. So much for that hope. Not that I had truly expected the answer to be so easy. But better to try the obvious and fail than to miss something. With that thought in mind, I signed my name at the bottom of the scrap of paper. Even if—when—this failed, I'd have to ask the duke if he had tried what I was doing. I should have asked before I left the dining room, but I hadn't been thinking about experimenting with the node at that point, only gathering facts about what had happened two months ago.

The plinth under the flames, combined with the width of the copper bowl, meant I couldn't reach the flames from the floor. I stood and pushed the paper into the node. The power crescendoed, the pure note transforming into the chime of bells. I recognized the too-fast melody as my power's way of identifying an opinion that held more hope than conviction.

But I couldn't truth-read a bit of paper. Truth-reading was an animate power. I'd sooner learn to judge the truth and lies of animals than an inanimate object. I also couldn't truth-read myself. But the node, the node broke the rules constantly. It made roses grow over the castle and candles light as people walked by. It wasn't such a stretch to believe its power could be used to truth-read written words. Except the node was locked to truth-telling.

It was a stretch, but still understandable, that a magic that forced people to speak the truth, when amplified thousand-fold, could shape the

world to match its truth. But reading the truth, whether through spoken word or on paper, was another magic entirely. One the node shouldn't have.

I pulled back and thrust my other—empty—hand into the flames. “My name is Isabel Cardh.”

Nothing.

I let go of the first scrap of paper, crouched down, and scribbled out the sentence I had just spoken onto a blank piece. I signed my name and straightened. Reaching into the node, heard the power surge once more, this time the harmonious trio of bells I associated with pure truth.

“I can't believe it,” I muttered.

“Can't believe what?”

I shrieked and dropped the paper. It drifted to the base of the plinth as I spun around. The duke stood not three feet behind me. His paws hadn't made a sound as he approached. Considering that I had been focused on my papers and the node, he could have been watching me the entire time and I wouldn't have noticed.

He closed the remaining distance between us, sniffing at the fallen paper. No, I corrected myself. He was a man. Despite his feline form, he was reading the paper. He flipped over my first scrap of paper, scanning that as well. He tapped it with a claw. “I tried this. First thing, in fact.”

“You did not see fit to share with me a list of everything you have tried, so I did not know.” I was being ungenerous. I hadn't asked him what he had tried. Then again, I didn't feel the need to make excuses for the duke. “I had hoped you had at least tried this much, but I figured I couldn't assume anything. And I'm glad I didn't.”

“Right, because you figured something out just now. What can't you believe?”

“The node is truth-reading signed, written statements. Somehow, it not only crosses the boundary between animate and inanimate powers, but also between active and passive ones.”

“You are certain it is truth-reading?”

“If you can call it that when it affects paper instead of people. But I recognized the sounds of my own magic.”

The duke sat, his long, silky fur fanning over my stack of paper. “The sounds?”

I nodded and sank down next to him. “I sense my power as sounds. When I signed these statements and held them into the node, I heard bells.”

“Did you see the flames change color?”

I frowned. “No. Why?”

“Because I did. It happens every time I pass a contract through the node. It happened when Cecily cursed me. And just now, it happened when you held your bit of paper into the flames. But no one else has ever mentioned seeing—or hearing—anything.”

The fact that I heard the magic and he saw it wasn’t surprising. People interpreted magic differently. Most people saw or felt it. Hearing it, like I did, was rarer, but not exactly uncommon. Even non-mages sensed power when using certain charms or enchantments. But only when they were the users.

I pressed my lips together. “I suppose, since you are tied to the node, it makes sense that you can always sense it at work. Would I hear anything if you held the paper to the flames?”

I grabbed the pen again. “Probably best to limit the variables,” I muttered, dipping it in the inkwell. I wrote out the words *My name is Felix Truthholder*. “Sign this.”

The duke read the sentence, then dipped his claw in the ink and scratched out his name. He picked the paper up between his teeth and leapt into the brazier.

The power flared, but I heard no bells. Then the paper dissolved and disappeared.

I gaped. “What happened?”

SIX

FELIX



I STEPPED OUT of the flames, draping the front half of my body over the rim of the copper bowl. “The same thing that always happens when I pass a contract through the node. The magic dissolved the original and created a scroll with the same text. It now sits somewhere on the shelves of the archives. This should only happen when I witness a contract. It is a function of the node limited to the primary tie-holder. However, Cecily's curse also disappeared. Also, when I attempted to write out that I would take the form of a man, I saw the node change colors, but the paper didn’t dissolve.”

I waited to see what Isabel would conclude, surprised to find that I wanted to hear her thoughts. Even more shocking, I felt a stirring of hope now that she was at Rose Castle, working to reverse my curse. She wasn’t the mage I had hoped for, but something about her made me believe that my contractual mistake might not have been the disaster I had first feared.

At the very least, Isabel’s presence made my existence more exciting. Even now, when she was focused on getting answers rather than bickering with me, her intensity made me feel more alive.

She tapped a finger on the edge of the bowl. “What is the primary node-tie holder?”

“Me.” She gave me a look, and I decided not to make her ask again. “Anyone with Truthholder blood has a tie to the node, but only the current duke—or duchess—can witness contracts. There is a way to grant that authority to a different member of the family, but it is only temporary.”

She didn’t ask how Cecily had managed, much to my surprise. Cecily's unexpected use of my locked node had been almost all I had thought about since waking up after the transformation. I cared about regaining my

human form, of course, but hiding the fact that the blood-lock on the node might have broken took priority.

Being a cat was nothing to triggering wide-scale wars to gain control of node power. The world had gone through that once already, and I knew that if word got out that blood-locks could fail, we'd face such battles again.

Isabel's thoughts went in an entirely different direction, which was both a relief and a worry. I was glad she hadn't realized that the node might be unlocked, but it also meant she didn't know the true scope of the problem I faced. The contract her father signed meant she couldn't use the node against me nor tell anyone else, but it still felt risky to share the truth. Illogical perhaps, but I'd let those fears rule me a little longer. Of course, even if I didn't tell her, she could still figure it out for herself.

She was too smart not to figure it out on her own when she was using the node herself.

"So, I can't witness a contract in that sense," Isabel summarized, "but I can read the truth of a signed statement. When I hold it to the flames, at least. I heard nothing when you entered the node. Did you still see the flames change color?"

"Yes."

I watched Isabel's annoyance and frustration with me disappear as the mysteries of the node engrossed her. "What color did you see?"

"Blue."

"What about for this?" She wrote out another statement and signed her name. She held it toward me so I could read. *The sky is green.*

She couldn't say the words on castle grounds, but the enchantment didn't keep her from writing the lie. She held it to the flames.

"Orange," I told her.

"What about this one?" She grabbed the first paper she had held to the node, the hopeful attempt at breaking my curse.

"Pale purple." A shade far closer to blue than I expected for something so patently not true.

"So blue is your color for truth and orange for lies. What color did you see when Lady Cecily cursed you?"

I wished I couldn't remember that moment so clearly. The flames licking at the paper. The pain that had followed. I shuddered. "Dark violet."

“What does that color mean?”

I leapt away from the node, landing on the marble floor with a thump too loud for my small form. “How would I know? You just said blue is truth and orange is lies. What does that make purple?”

“It’s your mind’s interpretation of the magic. I can only compare the shades you described to the bells I heard during my experiments. You have to figure out the subtle variations for yourself. How much something is a fact versus an opinion, or if the speaker—or writer in this case—intended misdirection will all play a part. Here, watch this.”

She wrote another sentence and signed her name, then rose to reach into the node. She met my eyes and spoke the words she had written as the paper hit the flames. “My father is amazing.”

The node turned a murky dark orange. Not the same as the lie she had written before, but clearly close. “How were you able to say that? You can’t lie on castle grounds.”

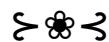
“I didn’t lie. My father amazes me with his foolishness regularly. So I spoke the truth, even though the implication is false. As I told you before, truth isn’t black and white.”

“Apparently it is blue and orange.”

She smiled, and the expression cut right through me. Here, for this one moment, she had forgotten she hated me. Even as I watched, she caught herself, a scowl replacing those upturned lips. The loss of that smile sliced through me even deeper.

She crouched down to gather the supplies she had brought out. She didn’t look at me. “If you figure out what the magic was telling you, it might help me find a way to reverse the curse.”

“Leave those. The power of the castle will clean it up.” The odds I could change her opinion of me were slim, but I could still try. “I’ll introduce you to Marc. He should be in the archives by now.”



I LED THE way downstairs to the bottom floor of the castle. Isabel followed, silent.

To the south, this level was subterranean, dug into the hillside. The hill sloped downward at the back of the castle, however, allowing for windows high in the wall that actually offered glimpses of the sky. Most of the

basement was one large room. We referred to it as the archives, but technically, only one corner housed the magically binding contracts.

The rest of the open space was taken up by desks used by the secretaries and clerks who helped keep Rose Castle running. I had sent them all to Leort and Haiwella after the curse. They could negotiate and copy contracts from afar, then send them to me to sign and pass through the node without the need for visitors to come to the castle. Only Marc remained, serving as my hands and as the messenger between Rose Castle and Leort.

Marc had claimed a desk under a window in the back of the room, near the refectory set aside for workers. With only us in residence, I had invited the secretary to use the main dining room, though I didn't always join him. In the corner opposite from the refectory were the actual archives.

Shelves filled the corner, rising to just above my height—my human height—and arranged in a manner that drove the clerks wild. The bookcases weren't in neat rows. They formed a labyrinth, meeting at odd angles, leaving narrow passageways that dead-ended, and confusing even those who had worked in the castle for decades.

Luckily, we didn't need to hunt in the archives for Isabel's contract. Marc had written it out twice, once for me to pass through the node, the paper destined to dissolve and become a scroll hidden in the maze of shelves, and once for my records. If Edwin had wanted a copy, we would have made a third for him, but he hadn't cared.

Isabel followed me to Marc's desk. The scribe looked up at her and smiled, and I had the sudden urge to swipe at him with my claws. By any objective measure, he was a handsome man, with golden hair, blue eyes, and refined features. He knew the effect he had on women and relied on it. I had almost forgotten that about him while we had been isolated.

Now I remembered why Marc had never been my favorite secretary to work with. He was too calculating. I never would have chosen him to remain in the castle and help me if he hadn't found me alongside my butler, Berklay, after the transformation. Asking Marc to remain had seemed better than risking letting another person in on the secret that my node had been tampered with. With Isabel here, I was doubting that decision. She had learned more about my node in a morning than he had in months.

Marc stood up. "Isabel. Welcome to the Rose Castle archives."

“Isa,” she said, ignoring his outstretched hand. “Only my father calls me Isabel.”

Isa. Yes, that fit her better than Isabel. Short and to the point, with no extra flourishes.

Marc’s smile grew, as if her offering her nickname made up for her refusal to take his hand. I figured it had more to do with a dislike of being called Isabel.

“It is nice to have another person here to talk to, Isa.”

Was my secretary going to pretend I wasn’t standing right there? I knew I was small and easily overlooked, but he had seen me at Isa’s feet when we crossed the room to his desk.

Isa shrugged. “You’ll change your mind soon enough. Most people decide they don’t care for my conversation before too long.”

I held back a snort.

“What man doesn’t want to converse with a beautiful young woman?”

I didn’t manage to hold back my hiss, but neither Marc nor Isa were paying any attention to me.

Pulling out the chair facing Marc’s desk, Isa sat. “The ones who are dishonest, which in my experience is most of them.”

Time to remind everyone of my presence. I hopped onto the table. “A problem you won’t have with Marc at Rose Castle.”

She raised a brow at me. “We’ve been over this, Your Grace. Marc can’t tell an outright lie, but that doesn’t mean he has to be honest.”

“It would still take him considerable effort to craft a lie within the constraints of the truth-telling enchantment.”

She shook her head. “Few people—except small children—have the confidence to lie flat-out. Most rely on bending the truth. There also seems to be a general consensus that it is morally better to lie by omission or misdirection rather than complete fabrications. I’ve never understood that viewpoint, but it means that the magical constraints here aren’t much worse than what people impose on themselves.”

I cocked my head to the side. “So you assume all people are dishonest without exchanging more than a few words?”

“When they lie within those first few words, it seems safe to assume dishonesty is a character trait for them.” Clearly, Isa had no interest in minimizing the scope of her power, even if it made Marc more wary of her.

Though I still didn't understand why she was wary of him. "All Marc did was call you beautiful. Hardly a lie."

Her eyes went wide for a moment before she schooled her expression to blandness once more. "No, he asked what man wouldn't want to talk to a beautiful woman. He implied I am beautiful, but did not actually say it. Based on my power, I'd have to conclude he does not consider me beautiful. Dishonesty in the first few words."

My estimation of Marc sank even lower. Did he not consider Isa beautiful because she wasn't stick thin? Or perhaps he preferred a woman whose cheekbones were razor sharp rather than her tongue. I'd bet he would consider Lady Cecily more beautiful than Isa. He'd be wrong.

Isa turned her attention back to Marc, who still stood behind his desk, his lips parted. "To return to our earlier discussion, sir, my insistence on calling people out on their lies often results in them not enjoying my conversation."

Marc snapped his mouth closed and took his seat once more. I could see him struggling to choose his next words. "The fault doesn't lie with you that people are uncomfortable with honesty."

I didn't want to watch him try to talk his way into Isa's good graces, though I suspected it would be a futile effort that I might find enjoyable under other circumstances. I didn't appreciate being ignored, as if I really was nothing more than a house cat. "But she is the one making them confront their dishonesty. So, in that sense, she is responsible for their discomfort."

Isa rolled her eyes. "If you choose to place the blame on me for not ignoring deceit instead of on the speakers for telling the lies."

"My choice hardly matters, as I'm sure those people do prefer to pass the blame to you." Forget about changing her opinion of me, verbally sparring with Isa was intoxicating.

She smirked at me. "You consider yourself separate from the people I discomfit, then, Your Grace?"

I chuckled. "Most definitely. My immunity to your power gives me an advantage."

She leaned forward. "You underestimate me. I don't need magic to turn a conversation to uncomfortable topics."

I met her gaze, pulled into the deep brown depths of her eyes and not wanting to pull away. "I think you'll be surprised at how many subjects

I'm comfortable with."

Marc cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should instead choose a pleasant topic?"

I looked over at the secretary. "I thought the origin of this discussion was Isa's deficiencies when it comes to pleasant conversation?"

Isa snorted. "At least I'm not the only tactless one here."

Marc's gaze darted between us, and he cleared his throat once more before addressing her. "How do you like Rose Castle?"

I waited, curious to hear her answer.

She shrugged. "There are too many clocks."

Her evasion made me want to purr. If she hated it here, she wouldn't have hesitated to say so. For her to resort to such a silly complaint, I knew that she must actually like Rose Castle overall. She simply wouldn't give me the satisfaction of saying so aloud.

Marc clearly didn't know what to do with her pronouncement.

"We aren't here for small talk," I said, standing once more. "Please show Isa the contract her father signed and my notes on the wording of Lady Cecily's curse."

I leapt off the desk. Isa didn't need me to protect her from Marc, and I had no interest in protecting the secretary from her.

SEVEN

ISABEL



ONCE THE DUKE left, I shifted my focus to Marc. Considering how benign our conversation had been, he had resorted to skirting the truth intriguingly often. I wanted to understand why. Was he like my father, with a compulsive need to lie? Did he enjoy the challenge of pitting his wits against the truth-telling enchantment on the castle? Or did he truly have something to hide?

“Here.” Marc held out a leather-bound journal. “I’ve recorded His Grace’s discoveries in this journal. You can read it while I dig up the contract.”

I accepted the journal, keeping my expression as bland as possible. *His Grace’s discoveries.* I wondered what discoveries Marc had made that he hadn’t recorded. On the one hand, if the secretary had an agenda at odds with the duke’s, I wanted to wish him well. Though I might have temporarily overlooked my animosity a few times while the duke and I spoke this morning, I couldn’t forget that I was here under duress. I also couldn’t forget that, unless I found a loophole in the contract, my only chance at returning to my life was helping the duke. So if Marc knew something about the curse that he had hidden from his employer, I wanted—needed—to figure it out.

I flipped through the journal. Only about a dozen pages had been filled, so I went back to the first page and began reading.

I name you a beast. Let your nature be true. Until the day you find someone who admits their love for you in your beast form, I curse you to wear the form of the beast that matches your heart.

The duke had said he still didn't think it was the exact wording, but it was more detailed than the version he had given me when he told me about the curse.

I looked up to find Marc watching me, a folded sheet of paper in his hands. I set down the journal. "Is that my contract?"

He handed it to me. "Yes."

"The duke said all contracts dissolve when he passes them through the node, and a copy is made in the archives. Since the same thing happened with the curse, why can't we find the original wording in the archives?"

"It would take years, if we were lucky. The magic that creates the scrolls also organizes them. We don't know where it is."

"No one has ever taken the time to inventory the archives? Wouldn't that be helpful?"

"It would if the archives were static. Scrolls move every time the duke passes a new contract through the node. There are five hundred years' worth of contracts to sort through."

"Then how did you find this?" I waved the paper, which, come to think of it, wasn't a scroll.

"That is a copy made specifically so we wouldn't lose the contract completely. You'll notice it is unsigned."

I wanted to ask more, but the magic wrapped around me suddenly tightened. I pressed my free hand against my sternum, but the pressure wasn't actually physical. Whatever the contract my father had signed said, I apparently wasn't upholding my end. I set the paper down and picked up the journal once more. The pressure eased.

Fine. I'd focus on the curse for now, but I would be reading that contract, whether the node wanted me to or not. I'd take it with me. I could put up with a little discomfort in order to find an escape clause, but I didn't want to do it in front of Marc.

I flipped to the next page in the journal, aware of Marc's eyes on me as I read. I read about the Truths the earliest dukes had written, turning Rose Castle into the enchanted manor it was today. The spells stretched the known limits of magic, turning truth-telling into a power that reshaped reality around the node. Each Truth controlled a tiny aspect of life in the castle, and when invoked, it imposed its truth on the world. From the ability to summon food out of thin air, to self-lighting candles, there were dozens of spells in place meant to make living here more comfortable.

I looked up. “I get the impression that this is not a comprehensive list of Truths.”

“As far as anyone knows, the first duke never documented the Truths he created. His descendants used the Truths they knew about, but over the generations, it is likely many were forgotten. That list is the Truths Duke Felix is aware of.”

“And their limitations,” I muttered, looking over the pages once more. Limitations like a full pot of tea being served with four cups. Meals could be conjured in an instant, but the ingredients had to be on castle grounds, and only certain recipes. I pretended to read a little more, waiting until Marc relaxed back in his seat before asking my next question. “What other Truths are you aware of?”

The secretary stiffened, and I fought back a smirk. He really thought he had gotten away with skirting the truth. As if I wouldn’t pick up that it was only the Truths *Felix* was aware of listed in the journal.

Marc paused long enough that it didn’t take any truth-reading to know he intended some sort of deceit with his eventual answer. “There is a Truth that gives the duke limited control of the weather.”

I considered whether or not I should push for more. That wasn’t the only Truth Marc knew that wasn’t listed in the journal. But I wasn’t my sister, with the ability to force him to talk. Better to let him think he had succeeded in fooling me. It meant he wouldn’t expect it when I next sprang a question on him.

I finished reading the journal, agreeing with the conclusion on the final page that Lady Cecily’s curse was most likely a variation on a Truth rather than the more typical magically binding contract. Nowhere in the journal, however, did it explain how she might have gained access to a locked node.

Snapping the book closed, I realized that there was more at stake than one man getting stuck in the form of a cat. “The Node Wars ended what, four centuries ago?”

Marc leaned back. “Closer to five.”

“And in all that time, there has never been even a hint of someone bypassing a blood-lock?”

I knew the answer. No one could undo a blood-lock. The discovery of the technique used to keep other mages from accessing a node’s power had

ended the Node Wars. If one had come unlocked since then, a new wave of battles to control the pools of raw magic would have soon followed.

“Not even a whisper,” Marc confirmed. “No one has even managed to touch the Persipilo Node, and that bloodline died out over two centuries ago.”

The duke’s paranoia—sending everyone away, his shady methods of securing help from a mage while ensuring she could say nothing about what she learned—made sense now. If anyone discovered that a blood-lock had weakened, let alone the lock on this node, that boded far worse than people discovering that a duke had been cursed.

Perhaps his motives weren’t as selfish as I had thought. Though that didn’t make his conduct admirable.

I rearranged my thoughts, slotting in this new theory. The duke’s actions implied he didn’t believe Lady Cecily had accessed the node through such a benign fluke as having a distant connection to the Truthholder bloodline. I might have my doubts about his intelligence, but I didn’t think he’d have missed such an obvious explanation.

Then again, assuming he had the same thought process as me was dangerous. I tapped my finger against the leather-bound journal. “Is there a chance Lady Cecily is a relation of the Truthholder family? Any sign she could access the node when she first arrived at Rose Castle?”

“You’ll have to ask His Grace those questions. Unless we are a member of the team working on a contract, secretaries rarely interact with the guests at Truthhold.”

My magic chimed with the rapid melody of an evasion. Marc’s attempt to mislead me only put new thoughts in my head. I wouldn’t have assumed he had ever spoken with Cecily before he made it a point to tell me how unlikely such an occurrence would be. He really didn’t understand the nuances of my power—few people did.

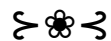
I waved my hand through the air, dismissing the secretary’s suggestion that I ask His Grace—though I would. “From what I understand, Lady Cecily was trying to convince His Grace to marry her. I’m certain there was plenty of gossip flying around while she was visiting.” I paused, carefully picking how to phrase my question. “From everything you knew of her, was there any chance she could access the node when she first came to Truthhold?”

“No.” Marc stood. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do.”

I rose, my mind spinning. That “no” rang with the clarity of a fact, not opinion. Marc knew beyond a doubt that Lady Cecily hadn’t always been able to access the node. I needed to consider what that meant before I questioned him further. I needed a better understanding of how nodes worked before I’d even know what questions to ask.

“Does the castle have a library?” I asked, picking up the copy of my father’s contract.

Marc was already walking away, his answer curt. “Southeast tower.”



I MADE MY way to the southeast tower in a daze. The magic tying me to the terms of the contract rubbed against my skin, irritating but not constricting. The node must be as unsure as I about what my next steps should be.

Would the duke believe me if I told him the secretary who had been helping him for the past two months was working against him? I didn’t even know if it was true. Certainly Marc was hiding things, but it didn’t necessarily follow that he was undermining the duke’s attempts to break the curse. Were his choices limited by a contract like mine? If so, even if he was working against His Grace, he couldn’t do much damage.

But not much wasn’t nothing. Underhanded tactics that I might otherwise applaud as the duke’s just deserts could slow down my efforts. I either needed to find a loophole to free myself or get to the bottom of Marc’s speciousness.

I reached the room that led to the southeast tower on the main floor and was momentarily distracted from my questions. Everything was blue. The settee was upholstered in navy velvet. The side tables were coated in cerulean varnish. The rug muffling my footsteps was swirls of sapphire and azure and more shades I couldn’t name. My jaw sagged as I took it all in.

I sank onto the settee. I looked around, unsurprised to spot a porcelain clock—white with cobalt designs—in the center of the mantelpiece. It was barely mid-morning. If I could leave now, I’d be home by sunset. I could explain away a two-day disappearance, but how many more days would it be until I was free of Rose Castle?

Would Chief Nassan even listen to any excuse I made? I snorted; I knew the answer to that question. The chief constable would love a pretext

to continue ignoring my skills. It was getting harder for him to justify putting “probationary” in front of my rank. Most constables never even went through a probationary period, but I had been saddled with that title for nearly five years. It was a convenient method for the constabulary to circumvent the laws granting women the same rights as men.

An extended, unplanned absence would give the chief all the reason he needed to continue dismissing my skills. Or possibly to dismiss me from his employ altogether.

I might not know where to begin to break a curse, but that wasn’t my only option to get home.

Unfolding the contract in my hand, I began to read. I barely made it past the introductory clauses before the node power wrapped around me shifted from irritating to painful. I tried to ignore it, but the longer I tried to read, the more the magic constricted until my focus splintered. Such a distraction might prevent me from identifying a loophole in the terms imprisoning me at Truthhold.

I refolded the contract and stuffed it into my pocket. If all else failed, I’d ask the duke to review it with me; the node didn’t seem to tug at me when I was with him.

Until then, however, I needed to turn my attention back to breaking the curse. Lady Cecily hadn’t been able to access the node when she first visited Rose Castle. Though she had left Truthhold for weeks before cursing the duke, she had most likely gained her tie to the node during that first visit. Could she be pregnant? Would a child with a blood-tie grant the mother access to the node?

I had too many questions and no answers.

I glanced at the doors to the library. Pale wood, with no paint, varnish, or any hints of blue, they cut across the corner where the two outer walls should have met and stretched straight to the ceiling. Blooming vines almost leapt from their surface, carved in perfect detail. Copper handles bulged from each in the form of giant leaves that curved back toward the door where they tapered.

I wanted to see what lay beyond, and certainly a library had a chance of containing the answers I needed. Books would be safer to seek out than the duke; their words would be straightforward. I stood up and walked toward the doors. The node power didn’t tighten around me.

I tugged on one copper handle. The door swung open without a sound.

Except for where the doors stood, the perimeter of the library formed a perfect circle. The shelves lining the walls curved to match. I stepped inside, the scent of leather and old paper enveloping me as the door swung closed.

Marc had told me the library was in the tower, but I hadn't expected it to extend beyond a single floor. I looked up. And up.

A spiral staircase in the center of the room led to landings at the second and third stories. Narrow walkways jutted out from the edge of the room at each floor, with a single path leading to the staircase. Most of the space was completely open. At the fourth floor, the stairs spiraled up to a small hole in the ceiling—no landing, no trapdoor.

I climbed the stairs, marveling at the sheer number of books visible with every revolution, but too curious about what was on the hidden level to stop and inspect any. When my head came even with the floor of the top level, I noticed the plush carpet first. It looked soft enough to sleep on. I climbed two more steps, my upper body now in the top tower room, and patted the carpet. Definitely soft enough to sleep on. Climbing the final steps, I took in the room as a whole and fell in love.

My suite in the castle lacked for nothing, but left me feeling shabby, inadequate, and overcrowded. This room outshone my guest room to the same degree the suite outshone the townhouse I shared with Sofia and our father. Instead of inadequacy, though, I felt envy for the first time since entering the castle. This room combined the simple elegance of the dining room with the opulence of the blue salon to create a sumptuous, yet tasteful, whole.

The furnishings showed no sign of wear, cushions as plump as if never used, candles with untouched wicks, velvet upholstery without the nap rubbed thin. Everything was in simple earth tones, from rust red to chestnut to beige, giving the space a warm, welcoming feeling. In this space, I didn't even mind the mahogany clock sitting on one table.

Then I noticed the ceiling, and love was no longer strong enough to describe how I felt about the room.

I stood in the apex of the tower, where it tapered to a point. But instead of stone rising overhead, a cone of glass topped the room. The roses that covered the entire building trailed over the glass in a living curtain. Sunlight cast hints of pink and green over everything as it shone through petals and leaves.

A crick in my neck forced me to stop admiring the kaleidoscope of roses, and I made my way to a door that led to the balcony encircling the spire room. A waist-high wall of carved stone latticework enclosed the area. Seven columns extended up from the balustrade to support the eaves of the glass roof, which extended over the balcony as well.

Wonder had allowed me to ignore the pull of node power up to this point, but the longer I marveled, the stronger it became. This time there was a sense of direction, a tug leading me back toward the tower room even as it tightened like a noose around my chest.

With a sigh, I went down to the third floor of the tower. The pull faded, but the magic was still a vise around me, slowly easing as I made my way over to the bookshelves. The same stone lattice as on the balcony bordered the walkway from the stairs to the books and the ledge around the perimeter of the room. I trailed my hand over the books, wondering where to start. There had to be thousands on this floor alone.

The answer to every question ever asked must be available somewhere on the pages in this room. The trick would be finding the answers I needed.

I'd start with books on magic. Anything about the Node Wars would be potentially useful, but I'd also take biographies of mages with node-ties. Or really anything that described the natural flow of power throughout the world.

Ley lines crossed the land in every direction. The magical rivers flowed into nodes, absorbing and emitting minuscule amounts of power as they went. Where ley lines met, the power gathered in one place with relative stability, even with more power constantly pouring in. Spells that would be impossible with only a mage's reserves, and dangerous if cast using the volatile ley lines, were possible when a mage tapped into the power of a node. But ever since the wars ended, the nodes had all been locked, so only mages of certain bloodlines had access.

That was all I knew about nodes. If I wanted to understand how Lady Cecily cursed Felix, I needed to know something more than what every child learned in school. The little I knew certainly didn't help me. Even for an enchanted castle, nothing made sense. Perhaps a pregnancy explained Cecily's node-tie, but it didn't account for how truth-telling magic could be used to truth-read written statements. It didn't explain how the duke

could lie while at Truthhold, when the node's power blocked anyone else from doing the same.

I scanned the bookcase in front of me, hoping to find books that might help me make sense of all the impossible things happening at Rose Castle. The first shelf held a collection of gothic novels, with a lone volume of poetry at one end. The next had a few more gothic novels, a handful of adventure stories that made my fingers itch, and a treatise on medicine. I mentally marked the location of the novels that called to me, wondering if there would ever be a moment I could open one. Given that I couldn't even read the contract binding me in peace, I doubted it.

I scanned a few more shelves and found much the same thing in each bookcase. For the most part, the shelves contained novels, though no more than a dozen of any genre seemed to be grouped together. Then the books would switch to a different genre, only for the first to reappear on another shelf. Interspersed at random intervals throughout, I found the oddest things: another book of poems, a biography of King Ranaski IV of Gostet, a gigantic tome written in an alphabet I didn't recognize.

This library could very well contain the information I needed, but I'd have to look at every single book to be sure.

"Now would be a great time for a little direction," I muttered, rubbing at my sternum. The magic had loosened around me. I knew it was there, but could easily ignore it. There was no pull directing me to the book I needed. The power could prevent me from becoming distracted from my goal, but not guide me to a solution.

I took it as a positive sign that the magic no longer pinched. Searching the library counted as fulfilling the terms of my contract, so I had to hope that meant the answers I needed might be here. Since I was mostly finding novels on this level, I decided to check the other floors before starting a systematic hunt for histories and biographies. I walked down the spiral staircase, returning to the ground floor.

The volumes there proved more promising. I took my time looking over each shelf. Treatises on topics from animal husbandry to millinery dominated the shelves, but several biographies and histories popped up in between the rest. I wanted to map out what I was seeing and untangle the mystery of how the books were sorted, but that wasn't my purpose.

Hunger distracted me when I was only about halfway around the room. I had found a few books that might be worth a closer look, but nothing

quite matching what I wanted. I still hadn't even the faintest notion of how the books were organized.

With a groan, I arched my back, stretching out the kinks from bending over while I tried to read the spines of the books on the lowest shelves. I had to eat. Surely the node respected such a basic need and wouldn't punish me for not continuing my hunt.

I patted my pocket, the paper within crinkling. If I was lucky, I could even read over the terms of my imprisonment at the same time.

EIGHT

ISABEL



GLANCING AT THE clock in the blue salon on my way out of the library, I realized that I had spent longer than I thought browsing the shelves. Noon had come and gone. I hurried to the dining room, but Felix and Marc must have already finished their meal.

“I guess it didn’t occur to anybody to summon me for the meal,” I muttered, looking at the empty table. I wasn’t used to depending on someone else to provide my food.

“I did tell you luncheon was served at noon.”

I jumped sideways, then glared at the duke. “Tsy take it! Can’t you wear a bell or something?”

He jumped onto the table and licked his front paw. “Where is the pleasure in that?”

“I’d take great pleasure in hearing you coming.”

“Knowing that I am soon to be in your presence brings you joy? I am touched to hear that, Isa.”

“You’re touched all right.” During our meeting with Marc, the duke had stopped calling me Miss Cardh. I considered insisting on formality, then decided I’d do better to embrace informality. I could use it to drive home the point that I was a person, not a tool to be used. Besides, polite formalities had never been a strength of mine.

The duke—Felix—laughed. “I assume you are here in search of a meal?”

“Yes, though if you don’t want to summon it for me, you can direct me to the kitchens instead. There is a kitchen in the castle, right?” The Truths recorded in the journal I had read this morning mentioned that the ingredients for the dishes called in by magic had to be on castle grounds.

“There is. Under normal circumstances, all the meals served here are prepared by mundane means. If you’d prefer to cook for yourself, I’m sure you’d find everything necessary in the kitchens.”

“I’m not much of a cook, so I’ll accept the magically prepared food, if you’re still offering.” I pulled a chair out and sat, then removed the contract from my pocket.

Felix reached out with a front paw, and I focused my attention, straining to hear the magic. His claw plucked at an invisible string, and I heard the chime of node power. A bowl of beef stew materialized in front of me. Another chime brought a glass and a bottle of wine.

Ignoring the wine, I picked up my spoon and unfolded the contract. I forgot about the duke, who still perched on the table near my right elbow, as I smoothed out the paper and read.

There were four main sections to the contract. The first section was a very robust, thorough, and intricate non-disclosure agreement. I didn’t particularly care about exposing the duke’s secrets, especially not after I had realized he was trying to prevent a new version of the Node Wars, but I still read that section carefully. It might help me keep my position with the constables if I could at least hint at some part of why I had disappeared without a word. It didn’t take me long to determine that was a futile hope.

The second section detailed the duke’s commitments, which were basically limited to letting my father go free and not persecuting him for attempted theft. I could see in a few of the phrasings areas where Father must have negotiated more favorable terms and ensured that Felix would have no loopholes to exploit.

The third section laid out what my father was to do, which, apart from maintaining the secret of Felix’s curse, amounted to not stealing anything from the duke.

Then I reached the section describing my responsibilities in exchange for my father’s freedom. It only took two sentences to ruin my life.

*In exchange for the protections previously stated,
Edwin Cardh’s younger daughter will serve Duke Felix
Truthholder, doing all in her power, to the best of her
ability, to aid the duke in returning to his human form.
She shall pursue any path to achieve that end that the
duke asks of her as well as any avenue she herself
judges apposite.*

“Bastard.” I shoved the contract away and caught sight of Felix, with his ears pinned back and his tail wrapped securely around his paws. “The sentiment applies to you, too, but I was actually referring to my father. He didn’t even try to negotiate any safeguards for me, did he?”

I didn’t need his confirmation. The phrasing of the contract left me with no doubt. Not only was I required to do whatever Felix asked of me in order to try to break the curse, I had to do anything I thought might help, too. There would be no passive rebellion—not that I had planned on one. I could not hide anything from the duke. I could not make excuses. If he or I had an idea, I had to test it.

“I’m sorry.”

“You signed the contract, so you must not be that sorry.”

His gold-green eyes looked anywhere but at me as his tail wrapped around his front paws. “I drafted the terms to favor myself, but I expected him to negotiate before signing.”

“And he did. Just not the terms that concerned me.” I narrowed my eyes. I wasn’t against using Felix’s guilt against him. “We could always renegotiate the terms of the contract right now.”

He shook his head. “It wouldn’t work. There are three signatories on that contract, even though your father signed for both you and himself. In order to renegotiate the terms of the contract, all three signatories would have to agree. Without your father, we cannot change the terms.”

“After I break your curse, I am going to make sure the law that allowed my father to sign for me is repealed.” It wasn’t enough that a new law made the old pointless in almost every situation—one scenario where a man could sign away a woman’s rights was one too many. That the one situation involved a powerful node made overlooking that old law a critical oversight.

“I’ll help you.”

My power didn’t work on Felix, but I suspected that if it did, I would have heard the clarion bells of an absolute truth.

But that didn’t change the fact that he had used that law to trap me here.

NINE

FELIX



I WATCHED ISA leave the dining room with a heavy heart. After I offered to help change the law that granted legal rights to a woman's closest male relative, the look she had given me turned downright icy.

Too little, too late. And I knew it.

I had known I was crossing a line when I signed the damn contract. Having met Isa, the guilt only compounded. I had soothed my conscience by claiming that Edwin could have negotiated better terms. I had expected him to. After years of watching people fight over every turn of phrase, a simple acquiescence hadn't occurred to me. The only term I wouldn't have budged on was the requirement that my curse stay secret.

But Edwin hadn't negotiated on his daughter's behalf, and I had decided that absolved me of responsibility.

Now I had to live with that mistake. Until she was freed from the contract, Isa would hate me. Probably after she was freed, too.

I stretched and jumped off the dining room table. Isa had returned to the library. Next time I saw her, I'd have to ask if she was looking for any book in particular. Summoning a book using node magic was far easier than finding where it was shelved. I'd make the offer now, but I doubted she wanted to see me, even if I was trying to help.

My time would be better spent checking in with Marc. I padded through the castle and down to the archives. The secretary was hidden behind the shelves of scrolls, so I waited on his desk, idly batting at the pen on its surface.

Becoming a cat had been an odd transition. For the most part, nothing had changed except my physical form. I still kept to the same sleep schedule, my taste in food hadn't changed, and I had never once felt the

urge to chase a mouse. Pretending my instincts had become more feline, however, had become habit around Marc.

I had pounced on a sunbeam the first time purely for amusement, planning to joke about my form. There had been something in the secretary's reaction, however, that prevented me from making the joke. Now, I reinforced the idea that I was driven by feline instinct, wanting my secretary to underestimate me.

As I waited for Marc to emerge from the archives, I wished yet again that one of the other members of my staff had been the one to find me on the floor of the great hall after my transformation. Having my butler know didn't make me as uneasy, but I needed Berklay in Leort to manage the staff still working on my behalf. Someone needed to serve as my hands, helping me search the archives. That left me with Marc.

He walked out of the archives, two scrolls in his arms, and noticed me. I batted at the pen once more, sending it tumbling to the ground.

"Have you been waiting long, Your Grace?"

After Isa's comments this morning, I paid closer attention to my secretary's choice of words. His greeting wasn't unreasonable, and yet it left me wondering. Could Marc even say that he hoped he hadn't kept me waiting or that he was glad to see me?

My nose twitched. Perhaps I had let Isa's skepticism infect me too much. Marc was an employee, not a friend. I'd had a more meaningful conversation with Isa within two minutes of her arrival than with Marc over two months. Of course his greeting was generic.

I settled back on my haunches. "Not long, no."

"What can I do for you?"

I looked at the two scrolls Marc set on the table before he took his seat. "Have you found anything of interest?"

Marc had remained at Rose Castle with me specifically to search the archives for scrolls that might help me understand the curse Cecily had cast. I had tasked him with going through the archives and pulling out anything with only a single signature, rather than a normal contract. In two months, he had discovered two of my predecessors' inheritance contracts. Having signed one myself years before, those were less than helpful.

For him to find two more scrolls this afternoon seemed unlikely.

Marc shook his head. "They aren't single signature scrolls, but I thought the wording looked interesting and wanted to read them more

closely.”

Yesterday, I would have shrugged off his words and ignored the scrolls. They weren’t what I was looking for, and Marc would tell me if there turned out to be useful turns of phrase. Today, I wondered what had caught his interest and why. Today, I remembered that the contract binding Marc to help me wasn’t nearly as comprehensive as the one affecting Isa.

I laid down, making it clear I wasn’t going anywhere soon. “What caught your eye in these scrolls?”

Marc hesitated.

It took effort to keep my body languid, my tail still. The secretary was hiding things from me. Had probably been doing so the entire time. I had never really liked Marc, but I had trusted in the enchantments of Rose Castle. He couldn’t lie to me, but I hadn’t understood just how much he could still deceive me.

I needed to see the contract he had signed. I had to double check exactly what he was required to do. But if I asked him to pull out the copy he had made, he’d know I was suspicious. Could I get Isa to request it without making Marc wary?

Marc unrolled a scroll and held it toward me, but clearly didn’t intend for me to read the text. “This one is a contract signed between two long-dead kings. It has a clause at the bottom detailing the penalties for breaking the terms, which sounds much like a curse.”

Without moving, I tried to read the final section of the contract, but the angle Marc held it prevented me. “A contract witnessed by a Truthholder and passed through the node can’t be broken,” I said in my most dismissive drawl.

Was that a flash of satisfaction in Marc’s eyes? Damn it, had I truly been so oblivious all these weeks, or was Marc’s charade only now falling apart?

“That’s why I wasn’t going to bother you with this scroll.” Marc let go of the bottom, letting it snap back into a tight roll. “But the wording is still intriguing.”

I’d have to take his word on that; contractual language generally made my eyes twitch. “And the other?”

“A marriage contract. The groom was one of your ancestors.”

“What is of interest in that?” I could understand why he thought looking at the first contract might help. Anything resembling a curse was

worth a closer look. But a marriage contract?

Marc shrugged. “Your family’s power must have always played a role in marriage negotiations. I am curious to see if the terms here include any mention of the node.”

If Marc was suggesting that the bride’s family might have demanded a node-tie as a condition of the alliance . . . well, I wanted to claim such a thing was impossible, but even though the truth-telling enchantment around the castle didn’t affect me, I still couldn’t say it. At this point, I wasn’t willing to call anything impossible. “You’ll tell me if there is anything of interest?”

His lips curved upward. “I know the terms of my contract, Your Grace.”

I suspected I didn’t know the terms as well as I should. Marc was hiding things from me, and though he had to share certain information, I now worried that other secrets could slip through. If I couldn’t rely on him, then I’d have to dig around on my own. Except Marc was in the castle specifically because hunting through the archives was nearly impossible for me at present.

I could pull Isa in to help me. I knew she didn’t like me and didn’t want to help me, but she had less freedom than Marc. My earlier guilt, almost forgotten as I worried over the secretary, came roaring back. In an instant, I made a decision. My choice might condemn me to life as a cat, but at least I’d be able to live with myself.

I sat up once more. “Well, I hope the scrolls prove worthwhile, but they’ll have to wait. I came to see you for a reason. With Isa staying at the castle, we will need more supplies. I want you to go into Leort tomorrow to stock up. First, though, I need you to write out a contract to take with you.”

TEN

ISABEL



AFTER EATING THE breakfast waiting for me in my sitting room, I headed down to the archives. I had a few more questions for Marc. The secretary was hiding something, and I could feel the power of the node pulling me to discover his secrets. The more I had thought about my conversation with him from the day before, the harder the magic tugged at me.

When I reached the basement, I didn't see Marc, but I could hear movement behind his desk. I walked over and found the duke attacking the drawer. He was so intent, he didn't notice me.

"Is there a mouse inside or something?"

Felix sprang away from the drawer, his fur standing on end. "Isa. What are you doing down here?"

"I came to talk to Marc. What are you doing?"

"It's my castle. I can do whatever I want."

I bit my lip. Those weren't the words of a haughty duke. No, those were the deflection of a guilty boy. And Felix knew it.

His fur smoothed out and he wouldn't meet my eyes. "Marc went into Leort to restock our supplies. He won't be back until tomorrow afternoon."

It would have been nice to know he was leaving earlier. I could have written to Sofia and Frederic, and even if my contract prevented me from telling them exactly what was going on, at least I could have assured them I was alive and well. Then again, Felix probably hadn't told me on purpose, not wanting word to get out that I was even at Rose Castle.

I sighed. Marc was already gone, so it was no use wishing I could write those letters. I glanced at the drawer. I wasn't above snooping through the secretary's things if I couldn't question him. "Would you like some help getting into his desk, then?"

Felix nodded, still without looking at me.

I slid open the heavy drawer. “Are we looking for anything in particular?”

“He should have a copy of the contract he signed when he agreed to stay at Rose Castle with me. I wanted to review it.”

I rifled through the items in the drawer, but there were no contracts. Wordlessly, I closed that drawer and opened the next. There were several papers here, and after a few minutes I found the one the duke wanted. I placed it on top of the desk. “Found it.”

Felix hopped up next to the paper and we both read.

“That explains a lot,” I muttered as I made my way through the convoluted legalese. This contract sounded more formal than the one binding me. It also had enough loopholes to make me think they weren’t accidental. Unlike me, Marc wasn’t required to work under his own initiative. He only had to follow the duke’s orders, and only in limited circumstances.

Felix looked up at me. “Explains what?”

“How Marc can hide things from you. Look here.” I pointed to a particular section. “According to this, Marc must share what he has learned in pursuit of the answers you task him to find.”

Gold-green eyes blinked. “That sounds like the opposite of hiding things from me.”

“But if he knows the answer before you ask the question, he doesn’t have to share. And since—unlike me—he isn’t bound to pursue any avenue of inquiry he thinks of, only follow your orders, he can know where to find the answer and simply avoid it if you phrase your orders poorly. The only part of this entire contract that isn’t full of loopholes is the non-disclosure clause, and even that is far less stringent than mine.” I pulled out Marc’s chair and sat. “You work with contracts constantly. How can you be this bad at writing one?”

His tail twitched. “I don’t actually work with contracts. I witness them and tie the node’s power to them, but I don’t write them.”

“I was under the impression that you played an active role in negotiations when people come to Rose Castle. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have been such a big deal when you sent everyone away.”

“I do take part in the negotiations. I serve as a mediator. I make people compromise; I don’t write the legalese.” He must have seen my shock, because he sighed. “Go ahead, say it.”

“You mediate?” I looked him up and down, as if inspecting his feline form could make this new information fit my image of him. “You act as the voice of reason and try to keep people from becoming enraged? You?”

Another sigh. “I do. I am quite skilled, too. After a long day of mediating, however, I find it relaxing not to spend my free time catering to other people.”

“You mean you enjoy being contrary.”

“That too.”

I rolled my eyes, then focused back on the contract. “Marc wrote the terms, then?”

“He did.”

“Based on certain phrases, I’d say he knows something you would find interesting and doesn’t want to tell you. I discovered yesterday that he knows about a Truth that wasn’t listed in the journal of your notes. I doubt that is the only secret he is trying to keep.” I considered mentioning Marc’s certainty that Cecily hadn’t had access to the node at the start of her visit, but for all I knew, his familiarity with the lady had nothing to do with the curse. I’d wait until I had more information before I sprang that revelation on Felix.

“A Truth? What is it?”

“Something to do with weather control.”

His head cocked to the side. “Huh. That could come in handy, but probably doesn’t help with the curse. Still, that Marc hid it from me reinforces that I can’t rely on him.”

I opened the desk drawer and put the paper back where I had found it. “Did you send Marc to Leort in order to root around in his desk?”

“It was one reason.”

The duke sounded so defeated. I pushed the drawer closed and considered him. “Do you want to see anything else while I’m here to open drawers for you?”

He shook his head. “The contract is enough. Thank you for your help, Isa.”

He hopped off the desk and wove through the furniture filling the room. I watched him go, not sure what to think of this latest exchange. Felix couldn’t trust Marc, but he had me now. He could make me do whatever the secretary was supposed to, and I wouldn’t be able to hide anything. But it didn’t even occur to him to ask for my help.

I got up and followed Felix, walking quickly enough to catch him before he reached the stairs. “What does Marc do for you in the archives?”

He stopped and looked at me over his shoulder. “He is hunting for scrolls that might help me understand how Cecily cast her curse.”

“Has he given you anything?”

“I told him I wanted to see any scrolls with only a single signature. He pulled a few copies of the Truthholder Contract of Inheritance, which did not help.”

“Contract of Inheritance?”

Felix turned and sat. “In order to inherit the title, the heir must sign a contract agreeing to the terms the first duke set. It is customary for the heir to witness that contract and pass it through the node themselves, so there is only one signature, just like with Cecily's curse.”

It hadn't helped Felix, but he would already know what was in the contract. “I'd like to see a copy of one.”

“Marc can pull one of the ones he located for you when he returns. If you still want to look at it then.”

Not hearing the truth under the duke's words was always disconcerting, but at moments like this, it was also frustrating. His tone was off. He wasn't implying that I might change my mind about the usefulness of the scroll, but I couldn't understand why else he thought I might not want to look at the scroll after Marc returned.

The reminder that Felix was immune to my power, which still made no sense to me, called to mind the other tasks I had set myself. “I suppose I'll go back to my research then. I don't suppose you have any idea how the library is organized?”

“Probably the same way as the archives. So, if you figure it out, I'd love to hear how. If there is a specific book you are hoping to find, though, I can summon it if we have a copy.”

“Then why can't you do that to find Cecily's curse in the archives?”

“My best guess is because the scrolls in the archives are a product of the node's magic. They cannot be summoned the same as mundane objects.”

“You'd think being made by the node would make them easier to summon with magic.”

“That would be nice. Since I can't summon a scroll, however, is there a book you wanted?”

I didn't know what I wanted, which was most of the problem. I was hunting through a vast library, sorted according to magical whims, with only the vaguest idea of wanting to find something that would help me understand nodes a little more. A biography of one of the mages who had locked the nodes centuries ago might be helpful. If I knew the name of any. The only mage's name I knew from history was . . .

My eyes widened. "Do you have a copy of Demeret's *Theory of All Magics*?"

Felix plucked at the air with a claw and a thick book landed on the floor in front of him.

I snatched it up. "Have you looked through this for clues as to how Cecily could have used the node? Can pregnancy grant a tie to the mother?" Even if Felix had gone through the book cover to cover, I still wanted to read it. *Theory of All Magics* was worth more than its weight in gold. I'd never have another chance to look through the rare book.

Felix shuddered. "I cannot stand trying to read Demeret. If you can make sense of anything in that book, then I will be in awe." I didn't care if it was written in High-Nemyan, the dialect used by court poets centuries ago. I'd slog through gladly. I was so impatient to dive in, I almost missed Felix's next comment. "As for pregnancy, I don't know how it might impact node-ties, but I am certain Cecily wasn't carrying my child."

I rolled my eyes. "A woman hoping to force a marriage might lie about a contraceptive enchantment."

"Not at Rose Castle. And while Cecily might have attempted to trick me and say she had a contraceptive and then not use it, I was wary enough of her by the end that I demanded a straight answer on the possibility of a pregnancy before she left."

"So much for that theory." I tapped the cover of the book. "Hopefully, this will give me new ideas."

One paw reached out again, and a red silk ribbon fell to the floor in front of the duke. "If you leave that in as a bookmark and don't leave the book anywhere but a table when you aren't reading, it won't get reshelfed."

"Does that mean any books I pull from the library will keep disappearing if I don't use a bookmark?"

"If you leave them on the floor. If you keep them on a table, they'll stay until midnight, even without a bookmark."

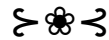
“That wasn’t in your list of Truths.”

“It is an automatic function of the castle. It happens without any input from a person tied to the node.”

I picked up the ribbon, settling it between the cover and first page of the book. “You included the candles lighting themselves in the list.”

“That is because I can choose whether or not to activate that function. I can’t stop books from being re-shelved.”

“Your home is a strange place, Your Grace.”



DEMERET HAD WRITTEN the most comprehensive book on magical theory known, and within two pages I understood why it was a rare tome cherished by scholars rather than a work that had been made widely available. Demeret used technical jargon to an extent that it almost resembled a secret language. He packed so many details into each sentence that I had to reread them a few times to ensure I caught everything.

The most frustrating part of reading *Theory of All Magics*, however, was that it apparently shared an organizational system with the library at Rose Castle. The chapters had no titles. Nothing indicated the subjects covered in any range of pages, because anything might appear on any page.

I refused to admit defeat, however. Making myself comfortable on the chaise in the spire room above the library, I read. I thought the first chapter was supposed to explain the different types of magic and how to classify them. I knew about power families and their relationships, so I would have skipped the chapter, if it weren’t for the random anecdotes. Demeret loved to go off on tangents. I had already read about an enchantment gone wrong and an odd application of chance-making magic that had never occurred to me before. For all I knew, I’d skip the rest of the chapter only to discover that the next page in the skipped section had a story of a node tied to an active power being used to perform a passive spell. Or an animate power being used on inanimate objects.

In fact, I was almost certain that if the answers I needed were in this book, they’d be in one of the little stories sprinkled throughout.

At noon, a tray appeared on the table next to me. Perhaps the only reason Felix hadn’t done the same for me the day before was because I had been wandering the library, not sitting near a table. I gladly stayed in the

spire room, working my way through Demeret and avoiding another conversation with the duke. I didn't like how often I came close to smiling while talking with him.

I didn't smile while reading *Theory of All Magics*, which lived up to its name. Theory after theory about all the idiosyncrasies of magic that I had always accepted but never understood filled the pages. I wasn't sure I fully understood them all now, either, but I was certainly learning plenty. Sliding the bookmark between the pages, I set the book on the table and tried to digest all the information I had read.

I rubbed at my breastbone, trying to decide what I should do next. I couldn't decode another sentence of Demeret. Not without a break. But breaks weren't a part of my contract. Well, since coming to Rose Castle, the magic didn't bother me while I ate and slept. I wondered how that worked. That first night, before my father told me what he had done, the magic had tugged at me nonstop.

Much as it was doing now. But it shouldn't be pulling at me right now; I was doing the same as I had all morning, and the node had left me alone, even when I put aside the book to mull over its contents.

Closing my eyes, I *listened*. The hum of power had a direction. Down and to the west. I was in the top level of a tower on the eastern side of the castle. Almost everywhere in the building was down and to the west.

I left the spire room, pausing at the landing on each level of the library to listen to the node magic once more. Even when I reached the ground floor, I sensed the same thing. Down and west.

The archives.

I followed the tug from the node into the basement. The hum of power led me directly to the corner of the room made up of bookcases.

I stepped between the two cases that created a doorway, wondering where the magic would ultimately take me. Did the node itself have a solution for the duke's curse? Could it lead me to the answer, when neither Felix nor I knew what that answer was?

No, it would have led me here immediately if that were the case.

I moved slowly through the archives, taking in everything. Each case had been divided into scores of pigeonholes, with scrolls poking out of nearly every slot. It was darker inside this labyrinth. The lamps hanging from the ceiling could not counteract the dimness as effectively as they

should because of the narrow passages that never lined up at the expected angles.

After two intersections, I paused, wondering if I'd get lost if I went any farther. I concentrated on the power wrapped around me and knew I had to go deeper into the archives. Maybe I could get pen and paper from a desk in the main room and make a map for myself. I turned, taking a step away, and the magic constricted around me.

"I'm just trying to make sure I don't get lost. I'll come back," I hissed. To my shock, the lasso of power eased.

"Isa? What are you doing down here?" The duke's voice carried through the archives. A clatter that sounded rather like a collection of scrolls hitting the stone floor followed.

I consulted the hum of node power once more. It came from the exact direction as Felix's voice.

I spun toward him, though rows of shelves must still separate us. "Did you summon me?"

"What?"

"Did you summon me? The node power pulled me down here, directly toward you. I thought maybe it was going to lead me to a solution, but I guess we're not that lucky." Now that I was talking to the duke, the power had tightened once more, too. Luck was certainly not on my side.

"Wait, I don't want to keep shouting to finish this conversation."

"Then hurry. This is getting uncomfortable." Only after I said the words did I realize that the magic around me had relaxed the instant the duke told me to wait. Odd that the truth-telling enchantment on the castle hadn't stopped the words before they came out. It was more lenient than I expected.

I couldn't hear the duke move, his paws silent even on granite. After a minute, I wondered what was taking so long. The node power was no longer tight around my torso, but there was still a slight pull toward the duke. He had moved, but was still deep in the archives, from what I could sense.

I crossed my arms. "Are you moving farther away?"

"In case you haven't noticed, it is a maze back here. The path to the entrance isn't straightforward. You are still near the entrance, correct?"

"Yes. Because I noticed it was a maze and didn't want to go any deeper without the ability to make a map for myself." I consulted that

invisible sense of the duke's location once more. Even in a maze, he ought to be getting closer to me by now. "You are lost, aren't you?"

"The shelves shifted on me."

"They move randomly?" I was aghast. No wonder no one bothered to catalog the archives. "How does Marc get in and out safely?"

There was a long pause. "Not randomly. They move when a contract is added that doesn't fit."

"Since no one has added any contracts to the archives since you entered, how did they shift on you?" My voice was dry. I should know better by now than to assume anything the duke said was the truth. I'd do better to treat everything that came out of his mouth as a misdirection.

"They shifted since I last memorized my way around."

"And when was that?"

If he answered, his mumbled reply was too indistinct for me to make out.

I sighed. "I'll go get a pen and paper. I can tell what direction you are from me. It won't help that much in a maze, but I'm sure I can find my way eventually. Then we'll both have a map out. And at least you can make sure we don't starve in the interim."

ELEVEN

FELIX



I SHOULD HAVE paid better attention to my path as I wandered the archives. The last time I had memorized the maze, I had been sixteen. I knew better than to assume that meant I could still navigate my way through. Even if only a single new shelf had been added in all the years since, the entire layout could have shifted. As, indeed, it had.

Still, I should be able to find my way out even without a map.

“The archives aren’t that large.” I told Isa when she offered to rescue me. “I can find the exit.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

I’d have to learn the route eventually. I could no longer trust Marc, so I had to find a way to explore the scrolls down here myself. My experiment today had not been a resounding success. Getting any scrolls out of their cubbyholes was difficult if they weren’t close to the ground. I had to jump up, catch myself on the shelves, and bat the others out. Not having been born a cat, I lacked their natural grace.

I looked up, my back half sinking down without my conscious thought. “I’m an idiot.”

“You’ll get no argument here, but is there a particular reason to mention the fact now?”

My whiskers twitched. I hadn’t meant for Isa to hear my comment, but her response was worth it. I barely knew her, but I’d miss her when she returned to Leort. Around her, I didn’t have to put on an act. “The shelves don’t reach the ceiling. I’m a cat. I can scale them and walk across the top.”

“Well then, do it already.”

I sank onto my haunches and leapt. I didn't reach the top, but my paws caught on the shelves, and I scrambled the rest of the way up. Several scrolls ended up kicked out of their niches. I peered down at the floor. It seemed climbing the shelves was more effective than purposefully trying to pull scrolls out.

Isa's voice carried over the shelves. "Are you all right?"

"The only casualties were scrolls. Not that they can truly count as casualties. They'll be back in their spots as if nothing had happened in a few minutes."

"Playtime as a child must have been truly frustrating if your toys disappeared every few minutes."

I made my way across the shelves towards the main room. I still had to follow the maze—I didn't trust myself not to slide right off a shelf if I jumped over a gap—but at least I could see the path from up here.

"There's a playroom immune to the tidying enchantment. Sebastien Truthhold recognized his children's frustrations and asked his father to tweak the original spell."

I reached the final stretch of the archives, and Isa spotted me. She fell into step below me, walking to the exit. "Was his father the first duke, or did many of your ancestors contribute to the enchantments?"

"As far as I know, only Duke Valois and his heir, Sebastien, made Truths. Sebastien's journals indicated that his children could not use the node that way, but never explained why."

Isa paused a few steps into the main room, turning back to face me. She raised a brow. "Are you coming?"

I looked down at the floor. Not that great a distance, until I remembered that I was about a sixth of my former height.

One hand flew up to cover Isa's mouth, doing nothing to muffle her giggle. "Scared to jump? Don't worry, I'll save you."

She stepped forward, reaching up. She was short, her hands just reaching high enough to grab me under my front legs. I could have evaded her grip. I wasn't scared to jump down, but I knew my landing wouldn't improve the image Isa had of me. Letting her carry me couldn't be worse, and it at least ensured I wouldn't injure myself.

She held me against her body for a moment, her fingers brushing through my fur. Then she plopped me on the nearest desk.

"Thank you," I said, my voice thick.

“Ooh, it hurts your pride to accept help, doesn’t it?”

That wasn’t the issue, but I didn’t plan to correct her assumption. My attraction to Isa was something best ignored. If I weren’t cursed, I’d take her hatred as a challenge. There were moments when she forgot why she hated me and simply enjoyed arguing with me. If I were a man, those arguments could lead somewhere.

But I was a cat. Nothing more than a fluffy annoyance in Isa’s eyes.

Moreover, our time together would be short. Soon, she’d return to Leort. I’d probably end my days as a hermit in my own castle, endlessly searching for a way to break my curse and lamenting the fact that I had let her go.

I thought about the contract I had asked Marc to bring to Leort. It was late enough in the day that the secretary should have reached the town. Riding, it was possible to make the trip to and from Leort in a single day. Since Marc had several errands to take care of in town, he wouldn’t return until late tomorrow. Then, I’d witness the contract, pass it through the node, and say farewell to Isabel Cardh.

“You said I summoned you to the archives?”

She pulled out the chair behind the desk and sat. “Yes. I needed a break from reading Demeret, and when I put the book down, I could feel the node power pulling me here. Given the terms of our contract, I assume you had a task you wanted my help with. What were you doing in the archives?”

“I was seeing how hard it is to do the job I had set Marc on my own. If I summoned you, it wasn’t a conscious decision.” I had been thinking about how much I wished Isa could stay and help me, though. If I had to be stranded at Rose Castle with only a single person for company, I’d much rather her than Marc. And that had nothing to do with the effectiveness of their respective contracts.

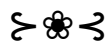
I had to let her go, however. She was right; no matter the technicalities of the law, what I had done to get her here was wrong.

“You want contracts with a single signature, right?” She looked over at the archives, then closed her eyes.

I nodded, but she didn’t see. “Yes. That’s what I have Marc searching for.”

She hummed under her breath. “There is so much magic in the archives. I wonder if the sorting system has something to do with the

timbre of the magic on the scrolls.” Her eyes opened. “I can hunt through the archives when I need a break from Demeret. First, though, I want a map. Do you think you can sketch one out for me if I put you back on the shelves?”



I SHOULDN'T HAVE spent the afternoon mapping the archives with Isa. If she stayed, it would be helpful, but she wouldn't be staying. I should have told her about the contract I had asked Marc to deliver to her father. But until the secretary returned with it, signed by her father, it wasn't worth getting her hopes up. She was still bound by the old contract until I passed the new one through the node.

I enjoyed mapping the archives, however. Isa and I had argued over distances and angles with every line drawn on the paper, but there hadn't been any true heat in our words. When we finished and returned upstairs for supper, Isa's mood was cheery enough that I actually harbored a hope that she might forgive me once I showed her the new contract I had sent Edwin.

We sat at the table in the dining room, and I reached out to pluck the strands of node power that would call in our supper.

“Wait.” Isa placed her hand on my paw, halting its movement. “How do you call in food? Your notes mentioned a trigger phrase for the enchantment, but I've never heard you say anything.”

“Because the phrases Duke Valois chose are a mouthful. Also, it is often preferable not to have everyone within listening distance learn the trigger phrases.” I wrinkled my nose. Marc knew how to summon his own food. It had made sense to teach him the trigger once we were alone. I should have explained this to Isa the first night. “Let there be on this table nourishment in the form of roast chicken.”

A platter with a delicious looking roast chicken materialized on the table.

Isa pursed her lips for a moment. “Let there be on this table nourishment in the form of plums.”

Nothing happened.

I laughed at the way Isa's eyebrows drew together. She looked insulted that the magic hadn't obeyed her.

“That phrase only works for foods prepared according to the recipes in a certain cookbook.” I plucked a strand of node power and the book in question appeared at Isa’s elbow. “To get something like a plum, you would use the general summoning phrase.”

I hadn’t taught this one to Marc. He could walk into the kitchen and get his own fruit. He didn’t need to know how to summon any item in the castle to his hand. Since it didn’t work on the scrolls in the archives anyway, it was hardly a spell he needed access to.

Isa wouldn’t be in the castle much longer. She didn’t need to know either. She would soon leave and be unable to use the enchantment. I flexed my claws, debating telling her the incantation.

Her expression morphed, becoming thoughtful. She held out a hand, palm up. “Let there be in my hand the item of a single plum.”

The plump purple fruit appeared in her palm. She looked over at me and grinned. “That will be useful.”

It shouldn’t have surprised me that she figured it out so easily. But if she worked it out on the first try, then what were the odds Marc hadn’t figured the invocation out over the course of months? Allowing him that power made me nervous, especially if he had made an effort not to let on that he could use that Truth.

I would have to make some hard decisions regarding Marc soon. But not yet. Tonight, I wanted to forget about curses and contracts. I wanted to focus on keeping that grin on Isa’s face.

I tried to picture the storerooms of the castle, full to bursting with forgotten items. What would Isa appreciate, but never think to call in herself? I flicked another strand of power. “The enchantment is very handy.”

Isa studied the yellow silk now draped over the edge of the chair next to her. The gown was old-fashioned, but still a work of art, the type of dress that a woman dreamed of, picturing herself dancing with a prince at a ball.

But I had forgotten that Isa wasn’t like most of the women I knew. She didn’t sigh in pleasure and reach out to touch the gown. She frowned. “The castle can sew as well as cook?”

She cared about the practical. Isa had no use for a ballgown, but she would probably appreciate a larger wardrobe of everyday items while she was in the castle. I sighed. “There are mending and cleaning enchantments

for clothes, but as far as I know there is not a Truth to create brand new garments. That dress was stored upstairs.”

Isa glanced down at herself. “I noticed that my skirt was clean when I pulled it out this morning, despite all the dust it had picked up on my walk to Truthhold. Good to know that I’ll never have to wash it.”

“If there is anything you need that the castle doesn’t provide automatically, please let me know so I can address the issue.”

Isa gestured at the cookbook. “I have food, a bed, and clean clothes. I think my basic needs have been met. However, I still have plenty of questions about how the node works. You never actually explained how you summon food without speaking the invocation.”

I wanted her to ask for something beyond her basic needs. Providing something extravagant might allow me to atone for forcing her to come to Truthhold. Then again, since it wouldn’t cost me anything, it probably wouldn’t be atonement.

I settled for answering her question as clearly as I could. “Lots of practice. After I use a Truth a few times that way, I get a feel for which threads of node power correspond to the spell. If I concentrate, I see the wisps of enchantment all over Rose Castle. I simply pluck the right strand, concentrating on what I want and where, and it appears.”

“That sounds like how mages can use enchantments.”

“I have an exceptionally strong tie to the node.”

“That was the reason you gave for being immune to the truth-telling enchantment. Does that mean that not every person with a blood-tie shares that immunity?”

“Exactly. There is usually one person every generation with a stronger tie who is immune, though sometimes it is more and my father’s generation had none.”

“So, it isn’t because you are the duke.”

“No. I was immune to that enchantment even while my father had the primary node-tie.”

“And he wasn’t immune.” Her expression shifted, becoming a glare directed pointedly my way. “Why didn’t you tell me you are a truth-teller?”

My ears flattened. “Because I’m not. My only magic comes from the node.”

Her raised eyebrow spoke louder than words. “You trigger enchantments in a manner exclusive to mages. You are immune to truth-telling.”

“Because of the node.”

“Yet your father didn’t share your immunity. Could he trigger Truths without invocation?”

“He never tried. He didn’t use many Truths often enough for it to matter,” I lied. My father had attempted to use a Truth without the invocation once I discovered the ability. He couldn’t even sense the strands of power, let alone use them.

I wasn’t sure exactly why I was lying to Isa. Perhaps because she noticed the inconsistencies in how my father and I could use the node without ever knowing my father. She recognized that there might be something more to my affinity for node magics.

I was twenty-six years old, had grown up surrounded by truth magics, and had never once considered the possibility that I might have power of my own. Isa came in and reached the conclusion I might be a mage in a handful of days. I needed to figure out if there was any chance she was right.

If I was a truth-teller, then not only had I ignored my own power my entire life, but I had ripped Isa away from her life for no reason. I had gambled that a truth-mage could do what I couldn’t and use the node to reverse Cecily’s curse.

Considering the months I had spent working to break the curse on my own, I wasn’t sure if learning I was a mage would be good or bad news. It might mean only Cecily could break the curse. It might mean that if I learned to use my power instead of the node’s, I could accomplish so much more.

If I was a mage.

I plucked another strand of power, calling a bowl of beef stew in front of me. “Eat before the chicken gets cold. Or find something else in the cookbook, though I’ll tell you this chicken recipe is delicious.”

To my surprise, Isa didn’t push any more about the possibility of me being a mage. That didn’t mean she didn’t push at all, though. “Then why aren’t you having any?”

I didn’t answer, summoning more food, a crusty loaf of bread, butter, garlic sautéed green beans, and wine. Maybe the influx of food would

distract her from her question. I hunched over my bowl, knowing Isa wouldn't let me off the hook twice in one evening. Would this admission be more or less embarrassing than acknowledging I might have lived my entire life without ever realizing I was a mage?

Isa waited until the last item appeared, then pulled the empty plate at the seat next to her over and sliced off a generous portion of chicken breast. She transferred it to the plate, cutting it into small pieces, then pushed the plate toward me. She filled her own plate. "I take it roast chicken is a bit like a pot of tea. It only comes in a form that isn't conducive to a cat serving himself? Do you have to eat stew for every meal?"

I pushed aside the bowl and helped myself to a bite of chicken. It was too late to avoid the embarrassment, so I might as well enjoy the food. "Not if I dine alone. When I don't need to worry about manners, I can eat roast chicken just fine. I was sparing you."

"If you'd rather dine alone, just let me know. Now that I know how to summon my own meals, I can make do for myself."

I shook my head. "I'd rather eat endless bowls of stew. At this point, any company is good company."

And I was lying to her once again. I often skipped meals with Marc. But I'd take Isa's insults and anger over his polite conversations about nothing any day.

She laughed. "This is probably the first time I've been called good company. If you'd rather dine with me than by yourself, then I can prepare your plate." She paused, her lips twitching. "I'll just pretend you are a small child and chop everything up into bite-sized pieces, Your Grace."

And that easily, needing her to cut my food was no longer embarrassing, but a joke—though I'd probably hiss at anyone else who said the same thing. "If you are going to treat me like a child, you can at least call me Felix. Given everything else you say to me, it seems pointless to insist on honorifics."

She shrugged. "Speaking of impolite conversations, what is with the decorating in the castle? Is that controlled by a Truth, too, or can I blame you?"

"It is not controlled by a Truth, but I have not decorated anything but my private suite."

“Does the castle reset to how it was arranged during the first duke’s life, like the books get re-shelved?”

“No. Furniture only moves as directed.”

“So the guest rooms are still your fault, though due to inaction. I guess that is better than learning you purposefully put together the guest suites that way. Though it beggars belief that you haven’t been moved to fix them by now.”

“I don’t remember them being as bad as you claim, but I haven’t been in one for years.”

“And no one has mentioned that it might be wise to redecorate?”

“Apparently, none of my previous guests have felt bold enough to complain.”

“Whispers among the maids? Even if they didn’t tell you, surely word would reach Berklay. He’d have enough spine to tell you.”

It didn’t surprise me that Isa knew my butler. He had grown up in Leort. His entire family still lived in town. I wondered how well she knew him, though, to judge his character so confidently. She was right. Berklay would have told me if he thought the guest rooms needed redecorating. But Berklay had as little reason as I to visit those rooms.

“Even when the castle was fully staffed, we never had maids here,” I told her. My mother had tried employing maids, preferring to rely on mundane means for certain tasks like laying fires. But with the cleaning and tidying spells that were always in place, there was never enough work for the them. It was easier to let node magic take over those few tasks, or ask a footman or kitchen helper to do an additional job once in a while.

Isa sliced the bread, tearing a piece into small bites and adding them to my plate without asking. “If the rooms weren’t overcrowded whenever you last visited one, then what happened?”

“My guess? My mother was probably redecorating the rooms before she died. She liked to see multiple options at once before making a final choice. She would have called in more furniture than needed, then sent what she didn’t want back to the storerooms. But she must not have finished the rooms in your hall.”

Isa’s eyes lowered. “Oh. I’m sorry I keep complaining.”

I blinked. “It’s fine. I know you aren’t insulting my mother.”

“I didn’t mean to bring up hard memories.”

I peered at Isa, trying to determine just what it was I heard in her voice. “Remembering my mother isn’t hard. A little sad, of course, but I’d rather face the sadness so I can remember the years of happiness that preceded it.”

She lowered her fork, though her plate wasn’t empty. “That’s a good attitude to have. I wish I had more happy memories of my mother. Her entire life was filled with disappointments, though. I’m not sure I have a single memory of her being happy.”

I wanted to insist that her mother must have been happy around Isa and her twin often, but I knew nothing of her life. Her father had signed away her freedom in exchange for his own. Saying something like that might just make me look like an insensitive fool.

I decided to keep my response neutral. “How long ago did you lose her?”

My mother had died two years ago, and the pain was still sometimes sharp. There was a dullness in how Isa spoke of her mother that made me suspect it had been much longer for her. Not that the pain would lessen, but it would be different if she had lost her mother as a child.

TWELVE

ISABEL



I PICKED UP my fork again, but I was no longer hungry. “She died when I was eight. It’s been just me, Sofia, and our father since then.”

Soon it would be just me and Father. If he didn’t get himself thrown in jail before Sofia married, which probably wouldn’t be long now; she spent more time with Leo than us these days. I put up with my father to spare Sofia from dealing with him on her own. Even if I walked away, she would never give up on him. She was too much like our mother.

It was true that I couldn’t remember seeing Mama happy, but I knew she had been at one point. Everyone who had known my mother, Penelope, when she was younger always said Sofia reminded them of her. The Penelope from before her optimism had resulted in constant disappointments. The woman from a time when she still had dreams.

She had loved Sofia and me. I knew that much. Even when she barely had the energy to smile at us, I had known she loved us. But she had also loved Edwin. That love had destroyed her in the end. The worst of it was, if it hadn’t been for Sofia and me, she might not have lost her sunny disposition. Her love for her husband might not have broken her.

But we had come along, two little girls with limited control of our truth-magics, and destroyed Penelope Cardh’s illusions. The lies she had told herself that Edwin would change for her—that he had changed for her—fell apart under the onslaught of our powers. Between Sofia accidentally making him speak the truth and my inability to hide my discomfort when his lies became a clamor, Mama lost the comfort of self-deception.

Despite knowing that his lies were falling apart, Father made no effort to change. He didn’t know how to change. Even a deathbed promise to Penelope hadn’t been enough to make him give up his criminal ways.

Pushing the last few bites of chicken and beans around on my plate, I cleared my throat. “Enough about me.” I didn’t want to answer any more questions. I recognized the hypocrisy, but my mother was the only subject that dried up my words. I needed a change of topic, and I had the perfect one in mind. “Are there other things you can do with node power that your father couldn’t?”

Felix cocked his head to the side, the sudden shift catching him off guard. “I once used the node to truth-tell my father, but he couldn’t use it to force me to speak the truth.”

Unexpected questions always got the best answers. Felix hadn’t wanted to discuss the possibility that he might be a mage before, but here he was, confirming my hunch. “That makes sense if you are a truth-teller yourself. Your father would only have the power of the node to draw on. You have the node plus your innate magic. That would make you more powerful than him and immune to his truth-telling.”

Felix rose up on all four legs, the bit of white fur at his throat catching my attention. Wide and flat under his chin, it tapered to a point, reminding me of a tucked in jabot. I’d have to ask him what he was wearing at the time of the transformation. That could be my surprise question some other day.

His ears flattened against his head. “I would know if I were a truth-teller.” He looked at me and sank back on his haunches. “Wouldn’t I?”

I shrugged. “You live in a castle under a truth-telling enchantment, with access to a node tied to that power. I can see how it would be easy to overlook the power.”

“Before I inherited the title, I spent months at a time in Haiwella. The node’s power doesn’t reach all the way to the capital city. And I’ve never used truth-telling away from the node’s sphere of influence.”

“Because you assumed you didn’t have the ability. Most children discover their magic by accident, slowly learning to control it. You could have used it as a child without realizing it was your own power and not the node’s you were pulling on. You would have learned how to control your power and never tried to use it when you weren’t at Rose Castle. If you had a passive power, there would have been no mistaking it, but I can see how you might have missed your talent for truth-telling under the circumstances.”

“How can I tell for sure?”

“I’d suggest trying to truth-tell without using the node, but given that the entire castle is under a truth-telling enchantment, you wouldn’t be able to tell if you had done anything unless you actually forced me to speak. And there is no guarantee your innate magic is strong enough for that.”

“I’m glad to hear that isn’t your suggestion, as I have no idea how to use magic without pulling on the node. The node is tied to me. Using it is automatic.”

I rolled my eyes. “It is still a separate source of power. Even if it is easy for you to pull on it, there is a difference between your power and the node’s. Feeling the difference should be instinctive, but you’ve lived your whole life confusing your own power with the node’s, so I’m not sure how to teach you the difference.”

The thought of being a mage had left Felix uncertain, but at this he seemed to pull himself together. His voice dipped back into that lazy drawl he used so often. “Your advice is so helpful, Isa.”

“That’s me. Everyone always calls me Isa the—” My words cut off, the truth-telling enchantment not letting me finish the sentence.

Felix chuckled. “If they don’t call you Isa the Helpful, what do they call you?”

“Stubborn.” I stood up. “Come on, we are going to visit the node so you can learn to differentiate its power from your own.”

Felix followed me, keeping pace on top of the table as I made my way to the door. “Didn’t you just say you don’t know how to teach me the difference?”

“We won’t figure anything out doing nothing.”

Felix leapt off the table and slipped out of the room in front of me. He led the way to the front of the castle. We walked past the blue salon and library, through the foyer, and entered the great hall.

The power from dozens of ley lines all flowing toward the node pressed on me. “Can you feel that?”

Before coming to Rose Castle, I had never felt magic without concentrating. But there was so much here that it was impossible to miss. I couldn’t actually hear the power without focusing, but the deluge still whispered over my skin, making the hairs on my arms rise.

“Feel what?”

“The magic.”

Felix stopped short, causing me to almost step on him. He looked back over his shoulder, his golden-green eyes glowing in the shadowy room. "There is magic covering every inch of the hillside. We didn't have to come into the great hall to see it."

"You wanted proof that your abilities are those of a mage, not just a node-tie holder. Seeing the wisps of power shaped by the node because of the Truth spells isn't enough. This is the perfect place to spot the difference between shaped power and raw magic. The ley lines feeding the node should be beyond your ability to sense if your magic is all due to your blood-tie."

Felix's eyes took in the room, a slow survey of the entire space. "I see the normal wisps I call on to use the Truths, nothing else. Mystery solved. I'm not a mage."

He pivoted toward the foyer, and I stepped into his path. "Why are you so set against being a mage?"

"Because I'm not a mage," he snapped.

The sudden heat in his voice made me pause. Whatever the real reason for his stubbornness, it mattered more to him than he was willing to admit. I moved toward the node, the flickering flames giving me something to watch besides the agitated duke. "It is more than feeling silly that you never noticed, I take it?"

"Silly?" He stepped between me and the marble plinth, rising up on his hind legs and pressing his front paws against my legs. "You think I feel silly? Do you understand what is at risk, Isa?"

"Lady Cecily bypassed the blood-lock on your node. I understand the implications. But whether or not you are a mage has no bearing on that."

"I had hoped that the issue was that Cecily found a way to get past the lock. That would be bad enough, but not as bad as the lock disappearing completely. But you used the node without any trouble. So, I thought maybe the lock had weakened. I still had a tie to the node, after all, it couldn't be gone. But if I'm a mage, then I'm not relying on the blood-tie. I'm using the power on my own."

I exhaled, Felix's fears settling into my gut. "Oh."

"So, no. I don't feel silly." He pushed off my legs, falling back on all fours. "I'd say my emotions are somewhere on the spectrum from despair to resignation at this point."

"Maybe you aren't a mage, after all?"

He snorted. “You already made a rather compelling case supporting the opposite conclusion. Do you really think there is a chance I’m not a mage?”

“A chance, sure.”

“But it isn’t likely.”

I bit my lip. “We should make certain, anyway. I could be completely wrong. I’m not a magical theorist.”

Felix’s tail drooped. “What am I supposed to see if I’m a mage?”

“I’m not certain. Like I said, I sense magic as sounds. I can feel the ley lines in this room even when I don’t concentrate. The amount of raw magic is extreme, but it is a subtle sensation. Not even something I really hear. More of an instinctive awareness.” I closed my eyes and focused on the power around me.

The node magic hummed through my blood, drowning out everything else. I walked backward, my eyes still closed, increasing the distance between myself and that knot of power. Finally, a different whisper caught my attention. Raw magic, not weak, but in its unshaped state it was like hearing a whistle pitched so low, it was almost beyond my range. I moved closer to the source, until I stood directly in the nearest ley line.

“What do you see directly around me?” I asked Felix, opening my eyes. “It will probably be misty or hazy, something you would squint at and still barely make out.”

Felix stared. He blinked and came closer. Then he stared some more. His gaze went unfocused, and he shook his head. “It is like rain drops in the distance, except they are falling sideways.”

“Toward the node?”

He nodded.

“You are seeing the ley line that feeds your node.”

“Not my node. Not anymore.”

THIRTEEN

FELIX



THERE WAS NOT a single Truth spell that summoned alcohol in a form I could consume. Wine and spirits all came bottled with a glass. I tried, but I couldn't open any. There was either no beer on castle grounds or Duke Valois hadn't been a fan of the drink and hadn't bothered to make a Truth to summon a mug.

Once it became clear that I wouldn't be getting drunk, I gave in and made plans to deal with the fact that my node was unlocked. I had suspected as much since Cecily cursed me, but I had maintained a sliver of hope that I was wrong. That hope had sustained me as I worked to break the curse, but now it was time to admit defeat.

Not that I'd give up entirely, but I'd have to continue my attempts on my own, and I was realistic enough to know my odds of success were minuscule. Isa would be free once I passed the contract I had sent her father through the node. I'd amend Marc's contract at the same time, sending him on his way, since he didn't seem to have my best interests at heart, anyway. Neither of them could betray what had happened.

To maintain the secret, I'd become a hermit. Even if I broke the curse, it was the best option. Though the node was unlocked, it still enforced contracts, so I'd still have to fulfill my duties as the primary node-tie holder. I wasn't sure how it even worked that I could be the primary holder of a tie to a node that was no longer locked, but the spells Duke Valois had cast centuries ago still pulled on the node.

To fulfill my duties, I had to continue witnessing contracts. I'd have the clerks and secretaries continue their jobs from Leort and Haiwella. It had worked fine these past two months. Besides, I wouldn't be the first duke who chose not to have contract negotiations take place in his residence.

The difficulty would be communicating with Berklay and arranging for deliveries of contracts and food. Without Marc as a go between, it would be harder to hide my condition.

I banished the various bottles I had summoned from my desk and called in a stack of paper and a bottle of ink. The ink bottle had a lid. I thought about it for a moment and called in a pen and ink together. As I had hoped, the inkwell came uncapped, the pen balanced inside. I gripped the pen with my teeth and tossed it to the floor, then dipped my claw in the ink.

I had signed my name multiple times since my transformation, but the last time I had tried to write anything more, I had decided it made more sense to dictate to Marc. It was too easy to send my claw tearing through the paper, and too hard to hold it in place as I wrote without smearing the words and covering myself in ink.

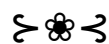
But it wasn't impossible.

By the time I finished my letter to Berklay, I really regretted the lack of a drink. Once the ink dried, I folded the letter without too much difficulty—it wasn't neat, but it would do. Then I contemplated how to seal it. I would send the message to Leort with Marc, one last task before his duties would be complete. I did not want him reading it, though.

The wisest course of action would be to ask Isa to stamp my seal on the letter rather than trying to melt the wax myself. She'd respect my privacy and not try to read the letter.

I looked down at the paper on my desk and decided that I wasn't worried about Isa reading the letter and knowing my plans at all. It wasn't that she was bound more tightly by a contract than Marc. She was, quite simply, a better person than my secretary. In fact, I'd feel better if I asked her to deliver the letter to Berklay. I wouldn't even need to include the task in a contract with Isa.

Glancing at the clock over the mantle, I realized I had spent hours drafting my letter to Berklay. It was well past midnight, and I was exhausted. Marc would return the next afternoon. By the morning after, I'd bid my companions farewell.



I OPTED TO avoid Isa until I could present her with the contract addendum with her father's signature. I needed to prepare myself for a lifetime of

solitude and spending more time with her would not help. Better to think about the fact that living by myself would undoubtedly be better than having Marc around.

Isa had only been at the castle for half a week. I couldn't already be used to her presence. I shouldn't crave it. Nonetheless, I found myself tracking her through the castle as the morning went on. She had already been in the southeast spire by the time I awoke. She stayed there for hours, then went to the great hall.

I couldn't even tell her to forget about breaking the curse. What did it matter now that I knew the node had been unlocked? To maintain the secret, I had to keep everyone away. It hardly mattered if I regained my human form under such circumstances. Maybe it'd even be better if I stayed a cat; they were supposed to be solitary creatures, right?

Then again, Isa already knew the secret. She was also bound by a very careful non-disclosure agreement. It would be safe for her to return to Rose Castle. Perhaps I didn't have to spend my days in complete solitude, in which case breaking the curse might still be worthwhile.

I caught the direction of my thoughts and laughed at myself. Once she was free, Isa would never want to see me again, whether I was a man or beast. Wasn't that the point of Cecily's curse? That I was an unlovable monster?

I had certainly done my best to ensure Isa saw me the same way.

So, my form didn't matter.

I returned to my study, once more calling in the materials to write a letter. This time I addressed the missive to my cousin, Charlotte. Though her parents were still alive, my uncle had decided he had no interest in signing an heir's contract when I took the title. Instead, his daughter became my heir. Before signing the contract, she had told me in no uncertain terms that I was to marry and produce an heir, a spare, and a few more spares just to be safe. She didn't want to be pulled from her life in the capital city to live in a castle on the edge of the kingdom, hours from the nearest town.

I was going to have to tell her what had happened. Though looking on the bright side, if the node was unlocked, perhaps we could break her heir's contract and abandon the family's duties to Truthhold altogether. The thought wasn't particularly cheering to me, but perhaps Charlotte would see it differently.

I hesitated with my claw dripping over the paper, not sure how much I could risk committing to paper. I might have to beg her to make the trip out to Rose Castle so I could tell her in person. Or perhaps Isa would be willing to deliver this letter, too? If I paid her expenses, a trip to Haiwella might even be something she saw as a reward. She could make sure the letter went nowhere but into Charlotte's hand, with a warning to read it in private.

With that thought in mind, I wrote my letter.

Even knowing I would only send the letter if Isa agreed to deliver it, I still struggled to decide what to say. I went through several drafts, not sure which was best.

Then I felt Marc cross the boundary to Rose Castle lands.

I glanced at the clock in surprise. I had missed noon and a couple more hours besides. Hopefully, Isa hadn't had any trouble calling in her own food. That was two meals in a row I hadn't sent her anything.

I moved from the tower room to the public office where I usually met Marc. I didn't want to wait a moment longer than necessary to get my hands on the contract freeing Isa. He would come directly here to deliver any contracts I was supposed to witness, otherwise the castle might decide to file them somewhere we'd never find. The provisions and his own bag could be left anywhere on the hillside, and they'd move to the correct locations without trouble.

Marc greeted me with a curt nod and placed the familiar satchel on my desk. "Here are the latest contracts for you to witness. Since I arrived a few days ahead of the normal schedule, there are fewer than usual."

"Thank you." I itched to get to one contract in particular, but I could handle a few minutes of politeness first. "Did you have any issues on your trip?"

Marc shrugged. "I did what I needed to."

His words left me wondering what Isa would have heard if she had been in the room. "Well, I'm sure you wouldn't mind a chance to rest. I'll see you at supper."

"Until supper, Your Grace."

Marc left, and I worked the satchel open. There were only a handful of contracts inside. I glanced at each, then went back and looked through them all again. I shoved my head into the satchel, certain I must have missed one, but it was empty.

The contract releasing Isa wasn't there.

FOURTEEN

ISABEL



I WOKE UP feeling like I was forgetting something important. Something about the node and ley lines. An obvious answer that would reassure Felix and allow him to minimize the risk of people discovering his node was no longer locked. I knew better than to brood over the feeling. My subconscious would speak to me when it was ready, and not a moment before.

Giving in to the inevitable, I rose from the ridiculously comfortable bed and got dressed. I stepped from my bedroom into the sitting room and wondered what the invocation was to move items out of a room. Perhaps I could use the same general summoning as I had the night before. I simply needed to know where to send all the extra furniture. Knowing that there were Truths that had been lost to time made me want to experiment. Did Felix ever tug on the wisps of power he didn't recognize? I might hesitate, worried about the outcome, but he didn't seem like the overly cautious sort.

He didn't seem particularly evil, either. I was no longer certain I wanted to hate him. I wasn't even positive that I was mad at him for forcing me to come to Rose Castle. His methods were abominable, of course, but being stuck here wasn't so bad.

I snorted. Not bad was such an understatement. I loved the spire room where I studied *Theory of All Magics* and any other books I pulled from the library. The enchantments on the castle intrigued rather than unnerved me. Even as frustrated as I was with my non-existent progress, I enjoyed the mystery of trying to break the curse.

Nor did I miss being in Leort. I got along well with Frederic and a few of the other constables, but I didn't miss them. Apart from my sister, I didn't really miss anyone—and to be honest, I hadn't been seeing much of

her lately, anyway. It had already started to feel like we were living unconnected lives before I came to Truthhold.

The problem then was that eventually I had to return to my normal life. My extended stay at Rose Castle would make things much harder when that time came. Assuming we ever broke the curse and I could return home.

As if my thoughts of the curse were a signal, the node power rubbed against me. It wasn't uncomfortable yet, a slight vibration only, but it made me aware of all the ideas I had to follow up on. I needed to read more Demeret. I needed to hunt through the archives. And I needed to figure out what it was that had slipped through my mind as I woke up.

I started with Demeret, making my way to the library spire room rather than summoning the book to me. I called in a simple breakfast of fruit and bread and ate while I read. The book was just as unorganized as I remembered, but also fascinating.

Reading through a chapter I thought was intended to focus on the making of charms, I resorted to summoning a blank journal to keep notes. I didn't think anything would help me break the curse, but I had countless ideas of experiments to try with my power once I had the chance.

Starting the next chapter, I almost missed the importance of one section about the possibility of mages with different powers linking their magic. Such a link hadn't been recorded even three hundred years after Demeret wrote the book. Reading his theories, I understood why.

Demeret posited that two mages with separate powers could never link because the very act of a mage pulling on raw magic shaped it. Once shaped, a mage with a different power no longer had access to the magic. It was the same basic principle as a blood-lock on a node, except a mage did more than shape the power in that case. They also tied it to their bloodline.

A blood-lock shaped the power. That was what I had needed to remember.

The night before, I had accepted Felix's conclusion that the node was no longer locked. The Truths still worked in the castle because those spells were independent of the lock, though they pulled power from the node. But I had felt the node power the instant I first walked into the great hall. The ley lines feeding it were raw magic, but the node sang to me in the tones of truth magic.

I shoved my bookmark between the pages of *A Theory of All Magics* and raced down the stairs to the ground level. I ran to the great hall. My feet slid on the polished marble floor, and I had to catch myself on the rim of the brazier. Still gripping the surprisingly cool copper, I closed my eyes and listened to the power contained within the flames.

Truth magic.

The blood-lock the first duke had placed on the node was still there.

All right, so the lock still existed, but perhaps it had weakened. I had used the power of the node when I ran my experiments, hadn't I? It hadn't been my power reading the truth of the scraps of paper I held to the flames. If I could use the node for that, then I should be able to pull the power on purpose. The only time I had ever drawn power from outside of myself was when I had added ambient magic to a charm to make it stronger, so I'd start there.

I considered what objects might be hidden in the corners of Rose Castle, and tried to summon a suitable vessel for a truth-reading charm. It took a few tries, but I ended up holding a metal drawer pull that would work. It wasn't the octahedron that worked best for my power, but it was nearly a sphere, which was a good second choice. The silver knob would serve me well enough.

I hummed. My power always poured out at the same pitch. The node magic was slightly lower, though not quite as low as my twin's. I kept my hum at the pitch I had always used, focused on the silver in my hand, and tried to pull the node magic into the knob. I didn't expect it to work. As Demeret had said, the node power was already shaped. I wouldn't be able to use it for a truth-reading charm even if I could bypass the lock. But I needed to get a feel for the power first.

What I didn't expect was for my power to slide right past the node and latch onto the nearest ley line. I hummed louder, trying to tame the torrent of power. I wrestled it through myself and into the knob. Hearing the faint click of the magic settling into the correct pattern, I cut off my hum in an instant.

I let out a shaky breath. That could have been a disaster. Ley lines did not like to be shaped. The power running through them moved too quickly. If nodes were pools of magic, then ley lines were rivers. No, white water rapids. With hidden whirlpools.

Every mage heard the horror stories of what could happen when experimenting with ley line power. If the mage couldn't control the magic, then it could burn right through them. Depending on the strength of the ley line, that might result in anything from a loss of their power to death.

I slid the knob into my pocket and leaned against the copper bowl containing the node. I had a bit of a headache, but nothing worse. However, I hadn't even started my main experiment, and it would be more dangerous than I had anticipated.

The contract binding me wouldn't let me walk away now without trying what I had come here to do. It didn't care about my safety. But I did. I needed to limit the risks.

I started by summoning a glass marble. Why there was one floating around Rose Castle, I didn't know, but I was grateful. A glass sphere of any sort was a safe choice for creating a charm with active-powers. Whereas my power adhered best to metal—with stone as a makeshift substitute—the node's power should work best with jewels or glass. I didn't plan to pull the power through myself, but directly from the node into the marble.

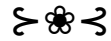
With any luck, the alignment between the power and the marble would prevent me from accidentally channeling ley line magic again.

I studied the flow of power in the room, trying to position myself as far from a ley line as possible. The problem was that more than a dozen ley lines converged here. I couldn't get away from them if I wanted to stay close to my target. Still, I circled the brazier until I found the spot with the quietest buzz of raw magic. Then I reached into the flames with the marble between my fingers.

I hummed, matching the pitch of the node, trying to push the power into the glass. Nothing happened. I pulled. My hum went sharp, and I latched onto the ley line. I cut off my power, falling silent once more. After a deep breath, I tried again.

The same thing happened, except this time, I felt my power skid across the power of the node. I couldn't make contact. An invisible wall separated me from the wellspring of magic. I tried once more, this time analyzing how my power echoed back from the node. Even at the points where the ley lines fed into the flames, I came up against a barrier.

The node was locked.



AT NOON, I made my way to the dining room, ready to share my discovery with Felix. Half an hour later, I admitted he wasn't coming and summoned my own meal. I devoured a bowl of beef stew—it was tasty enough that I wouldn't mind having it for every meal—and made my way back to the great hall.

The node power itched, not liking that I had wasted so much time waiting for Felix, though it hadn't contracted enough to make me think I wasn't fulfilling the terms of the contract. Since I didn't know where the duke was, I ran another experiment. I wanted to have answers for all his questions when I informed him the node was still locked.

I called in paper, pen, and ink. I already knew the node could truth-read a signed statement. Now, I needed to figure out how that worked. It wasn't like when I summoned items using a Truth. But I also wasn't drawing on the node myself. Felix thought my ability to hear the truth in written words was proof that the node was unlocked, that I was drawing on its power. I needed to understand how he was wrong.

I kept things simple, writing out a sentence declaring my name and signing the paper. Then I held it to the flames, listening not to the truth of my words, but straining to hear the magic beneath that. I repeated the action over and over, but the power fueling the spell was too faint to hear under the bells that proclaimed my statement to be true.

I reached out again, my arm tired by this point. I didn't expect to hear anything different, but I didn't know what else to try. There had to be a way to reconcile the fact that I was using the node to truth-read the paper with my inability to touch the power in any other way.

This time, I didn't hear the bells. My eyes snapped open, and I saw my hand trembling just outside the flames, while oranges and reds danced over the paper. I pushed my arm forward, my fingers entering the node, and I heard the bells.

"Well, damn. Demeret was wrong."

Apparently, charms could be made without using the correctly shaped vessel. Because the flames were a giant charm. That was why I had to be touching them to truth-read the paper. I wasn't using the node's power directly; I was accessing shaped power that had been stored in the flames for anyone to use.

I studied the fire, especially the tendrils near the top. I was assuming the magic was tied to the flames, but perhaps I was thinking of it incorrectly. What if touching the flames to truth-read was simply a product of the charm and the fire both being tied to the node itself?

Perhaps Demeret wasn't wrong, and the node formed a perfect octahedron, ideal for a truth-charm.

I stepped back. "Let there be on the floor of the great hall the item of a chair."

Nothing happened. The summoning spell was odd. It could give me items I didn't know to name if I described what I wanted, like the silver drawer pull still in my pocket, but it wouldn't bring me an item if I was too generic. I pictured my sitting room, then tried again. "Let there be on the floor of the great hall the item of a gray damask wingback chair."

The chair materialized. I slid it as close to the plinth holding the node as possible and climbed onto the seat. My feet sank into the soft cushions, and I fought to maintain my balance. Once I was steady, I reached toward the tip of the flames, making sure to get both my hand and the paper inside them at the same time. Nothing. I slowly lowered my hand. It was only when I reached about the middle of the entire height of the flames, still well higher than I had been using before, that the truth-reading charm worked. My hand was right at the edge of what I would consider the main part of the flames. Above, tongues of fire flickered back and forth, with any one space just as likely to be clear as filled with fire. Below, the flames settled into a steady whole, curving to fill the base of the copper bowl.

The flames weren't the charm, the node itself was.

I jumped off the chair.

I needed to tell Felix about my discovery.

I searched throughout the castle, but a small cat was hard to find in such a large and clutter-filled building. The node didn't help by guiding me in the correct direction, either. Apparently if the duke so much as thought that my help might be useful, the power of the contract would pull me toward him, but I could have urgent information to share and it did nothing.

At one point, I crossed paths with Marc, who must have returned only a short time before.

“Have you seen the duke?” I asked him. I had already traipsed through the entire castle.

“He was in his office about an hour ago.”

“Which room is his office?”

Marc directed me to a room I had been through three times already. I went back to check it for a fourth time, already knowing that I wouldn’t find Felix.

The office connected to the main negotiation room behind the great hall. I wandered through that room and slid open the pocket doors. The wingback chair I had summoned still stood next to the node. I looked at the chair for a moment, wondering if I should move it. I didn’t want to send it back to my sitting room.

Then I blinked, thinking about how I had pulled the chair into the great hall in the first place.

I smiled. “Let there be in this great hall the duke by the name of Felix Truthholder.”

The black cat materialized halfway between me and the node. His fur stood on end, and his tail puffed out to twice its normal size as he hissed and spun. His gaze skipped right over me on the first pass. Then he finished surveying the room, and blinked at me, sense slowly returning to his eyes.

FIFTEEN

FELIX



“DID YOU JUST use the summoning spell on me?” I stared at Isa, still a little disoriented.

I had been in the spire room of my tower while Isa explored the entire castle. When she entered my suite and called out to me, I hadn’t answered. Until I understood why Marc hadn’t brought back the contract I had sent him with, I didn’t want to face Isa. She already thought of me as a liar. If I told her I had tried to free her, but oops, the contract went missing, she’d never believe me. She’d think it was a ploy to improve her opinion of me.

I did hope to improve her opinion of me, but it wasn’t a ploy.

She left, and I went back to brooding about how everything had gone wrong. Then the air around me charged, like I was in the middle of a lightning storm, and the floor dissolved. Looking around now, I gathered I had actually been the one to dissolve, not the floor. In an instant, I had been whisked from the spire room to the great hall.

“I couldn’t find you.”

“Did it occur to you that I didn’t wish to be found?” I looked away from Isa, focusing on the wingback chair that didn’t use to live in my great hall. Well, so long as it was there, I might as well make use of it. I hopped onto the seat and curled my body into a comfortable pose.

“It occurred to me.”

I glared. “Then why did you summon me?”

“Because you summoned me to your castle. I made a discovery today that I thought I should share. I don’t know if it will help you break the curse, but it should at least give you some peace of mind.”

My ears pricked forward, my interest caught. “What did you discover?”

“The node is still locked. I can’t access the power, and it still resonates as truth-magic. I don’t know how Lady Cecily used it to curse you, but she must be an exception.”

I wanted to believe Isa’s conclusions, but I had held onto hope for too long already. I knew better. “You used the node the other day.”

“No, I used a charm powered by the node. Trust me, Felix. I spent all morning trying to access the power of the node. It is still tied to truth-telling; I can hear that in the magic. So, I thought maybe it was tied to that power, but the blood-lock had faded, in which case I should be able to touch the power, even if I can’t shape it. But I can’t.” Isa pulled a piece of paper from her pocket, dropping it on the chair next to me.

I craned my head around and read where she had written out a sentence naming herself, her signature below.

She wasn’t done with her lecture. “After luncheon, I decided to figure out why I could use the node to truth-read written statements. I still can’t tell you how the node accomplishes that feat, but I am positive it is a charm of some sort. Anyone in contact with the node will have access to the spell. That’s why you saw colors when I used the charm; you are always touching the node through your blood-tie. But I heard nothing when you used it because I wasn’t touching the flames.”

I looked up from the paper. “The node is locked.”

Isa nodded. “The node is locked. No matter how Lady Cecily gained access to the power, it doesn’t change the fact that you are the primary tie-holder. You are both truth-tellers. So, if she could curse you into the shape of a cat, then you should be able to change yourself back.”

“If you are right—”

“I am.”

I flicked my tail. “*If* you are right, then that makes it less likely that another series of node wars will erupt, but it doesn’t help me break the curse. I should have the same abilities as Cecily, since I’m apparently a truth-teller, but I already tried writing my own Truth to change myself back to human form. It didn’t work.”

Amazing how, only hours ago, I had resigned myself to a lonely life stuck in the form of a cat. Yet now that Isa offered me hope that I didn’t have to keep everyone away from the node, I was impatient to regain my human form. I couldn’t be happy with a partial win.

Or perhaps I had realized that being stuck as a cat, even with company, was a different form of loneliness.

Isa rolled her eyes. "I can't solve everything in a single day. I know next to nothing about how Truths are made. That's what you want me to search the archives for, isn't it? The scrolls that contain the castle's Truths?"

"Well, yes, except Marc is back now."

"So?"

"So, he'll wonder what is going on if you start searching the archives. I'd rather not clue him in to the fact that I no longer trust him. I'll let him continue the search. He might not be working with my best interests at heart, but if he finds a scroll with a single signature, he has no choice but to bring it to me."

I couldn't send Marc on his way. Not when Isa was still trapped in the castle. So long as I was forced to rely on him to carry any messages to Leort for me, I couldn't afford to let on that I distrusted him either. He already had too much power over my life. I needed him complacent.

"If you don't want me in the archives, then I suppose I'll go back to reading Demeret. I still have plenty of questions about how the node magic works."

I squinted up at her. "Are you excited to read that mess of a book? Still?"

"The information is fascinating. I've learned more in the last two days about magic than in an entire lifetime of being a mage."

"If I didn't know better, Isa, I'd say you are enjoying your stay at Rose Castle."

I waited for her to refute me, but all she did was shrug. "I miss Sofia, and my life is going to be in shambles when I finally return to Leort, but I'm not miserable here."

"Why is your life going to be in shambles?" I plucked at a strand of node power, calling in a second chair.

Isa pressed her lips together, then took the proffered seat. "I'm a probationary constable. I've been working for the constables since I was nineteen, but the chief refuses to grant me full status."

"Why not?"

"Guess," she said in a dry tone that did nothing to hide her frustration.

"You caught him lying and told his wife about his mistress."

“His wife is friends with his mistress. Guess again.”

“You bullied a suspect who refused to answer your questions.”

She frowned. “I won’t stop asking questions, but I don’t bully.”

“I know. I was kidding. The chief is probably reluctant to make you a full constable because he knows you are the best and he feels intimidated.”

This time, she snorted. “His opinion of me is not that high. He won’t promote me because I’m a woman. He is positive I can’t cut it as a constable, despite years of evidence to the contrary.”

“That is horrible, but I’m not sure why coming to Rose Castle makes things worse?”

“Frederic, the constable who mentored me, has been trying to change the chief’s mind for years. He thought he was finally making progress, that my record would be enough to overcome the last of Chief Nassan’s doubts. But I just disappeared without warning. Not only will I not get the promotion, but I’ll be lucky to still have a job when I get back to Leort.”

Isa didn't even sound angry. That was the worst part. She had gone beyond rage and into calm acceptance. I didn’t like seeing her calm. It didn't suit her.

I needed to talk to Marc and find out why her father hadn't signed the contract. She had only been here a few days. There was still time to salvage her life. I used the magic of Rose Castle to locate Marc. He was on his way to the dining room.

Leaping off the chair, my claws clicking against the cool marble as I landed, I paused and looked over at Isa. I couldn’t change the past and didn’t know how to improve the future, but her explanation left me feeling more than just guilt. I felt the anger that she no longer did. “Why put up with that? You deserve to be appreciated for your talents.”

“It’s not like I have a choice.” She rose, following me out of the great hall. “At least the chief let me work as a constable, even if only a probationary one. The magistrates wouldn’t even consider letting me train to work as an advocate.”

“Because you are a woman? That’s illegal.”

“Unfortunately, the magistrates are as good as you at finding legal loopholes. They never said they wouldn’t hire me because I was a woman. Instead, they claimed I didn’t have an adequate education. They wanted me to study law in Haiwella for years.”

We entered the dining room ahead of Marc and moved to the far end of the table. I ignored the reminder that I had wronged Isa just as badly. I might have used a law against her, but not because I thought her unworthy. “How did they justify that the men they hired hadn’t received that same education? That sort of double standard is grounds to challenge them.”

She gave me a pitying look. “Those men were all protégés of magistrates. They had the advantage of years of learning from their mentors, and therefore did not need additional education. And protégés are very much chosen at the discretion of the magistrates, with no law forcing them to choose based on anything but their own whims.”

“That’s outrageous.”

“That’s Leort.”

Marc entered the dining room, making his way down the table to sit across from Isa. I ignored him. My questions for the secretary would have to wait until Isa wasn’t around.

“Why stay? Things might not be perfect, but attitudes have shifted in other parts of the country. Princess Charmina’s tours over the past few years have helped a lot. Maybe she’ll stop in Leort when she comes to sign her inheritance contract and shake things up.”

“I hope she does, because Leort is home. I can’t imagine moving away from the area. Who wants to be surrounded by flat fields when you can have mountains in your backyard?”

Marc shifted in his seat, and I realized I still hadn’t called in any food. While both Isa and Marc could summon a meal for themselves, I always provided the meal when we dined together. I plucked at the strands of power, filling the table.

Isa filled a plate, cutting everything into small pieces. She set it in front of me without a word. Then, before Marc could react, she returned to our discussion. “When is the crown princess due to sign her inheritance contract? She reached her majority earlier this year, didn’t she?”

“Yes, but she has until she turns twenty-five to fulfill the marriage conditions. Not signing the contract won’t keep her from inheriting, either. It is more of a symbolic gesture.”

The royal family of Nemya followed a unique custom regarding the monarch’s spouse. Each generation, the royal consort came from a different level of society. Foreign royalty, domestic nobility, commoner.

The cycle repeated over and over, in theory keeping the royal family balanced and in tune with the needs of the kingdom.

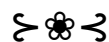
Princess Charmina would have to marry a commoner. Signing a Rose Castle contract was not a condition of her inheritance, but it was a tradition.

“Still.” Isa sliced a bite of pork, but didn’t eat it yet. “It makes sense that she would sign the contract sooner than later. Don’t you agree, Marc?”

The secretary swallowed and patted his lips with a napkin. “Her journey to Rose Castle will no doubt be a spectacle. It will take time to arrange.”

Isa’s lips pressed together, and I wondered what she heard under his words. Then I wondered what I’d do if I didn’t break the curse before the princess made her journey. It was one thing to tell everyone that I wanted privacy and would fulfill my duties without an audience. I couldn’t say the same thing to the princess. She would want to see her contract be passed through the node.

But that was a worry for another day. I had more than enough to occupy myself without borrowing trouble.



WHEN ISA SET down her fork, having just finished her last bite of the cherry tart I had summoned for dessert, I turned to Marc. “Could I have a word once you finish? I have a few questions about your trip into Leort.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Isa looked between us, but accepted the unspoken hint that she was not welcome for this conversation. She pushed away from the table. “I should return to my reading.”

I blinked, momentarily distracted. “You don’t have to work every second of the day, you know. You can relax in the evening.”

She raised a brow. “Tell that to the node.”

Damn. I really had made a mess of that contract. But if her father wouldn’t sign an addendum, I wasn’t sure how to fix anything.

I waited until I sensed Isa in the blue salon before turning back to Marc. “I noticed that the contract I sent with you for Edwin Cardh wasn’t in the satchel you delivered this afternoon. What happened?”

Marc folded his napkin neatly into quarters, placing it on the table next to his plate. His movements were unhurried. They weren’t nervous

fidgets, but quiet confidence. I felt the fur along my spine rise and hoped the secretary missed my reaction. If he reached the point of overconfidence, he might make a mistake.

I wished I could have kept Isa in the room for this conversation. Marc was keeping secrets, otherwise he would have mentioned the contract when I asked him how his trip had gone. He couldn't lie outright, but as Isa had proven, there were plenty of ways to work around that limitation. If she were here, she'd hear what type of evasion he employed. She'd know what follow-up questions to ask.

But while I wanted her power, I didn't want her to witness this conversation. For all I knew, her father had refused to sign the contract because he didn't give a damn about his daughter. That wasn't a truth she needed to hear.

I watched Marc carefully, not wanting to miss even the most minuscule expression. In theory, I could pull on the power of the node to make him speak the truth, but I had only done that once by accident, and wasn't sure how to use the power on command. Even if I managed, it would only force him to answer. It wouldn't constrain him any more than the truth-telling enchantment already over the entire hillside. Still, I concentrated until I could see the node power drifting through the room, gathering it to myself. It couldn't hurt to try.

"He didn't sign the contract."

Color flared around Marc, a halo of dusky purple.

I gasped, and Marc's eyes narrowed. "Your Grace?"

Keeping a hold of the node power I had surrounded myself in, I tried to concentrate on the conversation, instead of the impossibility of what I was seeing. "Why didn't he sign it?"

Marc shrugged. "He didn't tell me."

Once more, purple suffused the air around the secretary, the color darker and muddier this time.

"Why didn't you mention it this afternoon?"

"There's nothing you can do about it, so I'm not sure why it matters."

This time the halo of color was a pale grayish-green. I considered the colors, wondering exactly what they meant. Nothing good, I was certain. Marc was lying to me, despite the truth-telling enchantment. Beyond that, though, I didn't know how to interpret the colors.

The secretary stood up. I had let myself get distracted for too long. He spoke before I could ask another question. “If you’ll excuse me, Your Grace, I’d prefer to retire early this evening.”

Even this comment didn’t earn Marc an aura of the bright blue I knew signaled a simple truth. Everything with the secretary was a misdirection.

I let him leave and released the node power. Wondering why I could use the node to truth-read could wait. It was more important to figure out what the colors I had seen around Marc meant.

My mind shifted to Isa, sensing her presence in the library spire room. I almost went up, wanting to ask her right then to help me decode the colors. Then I remembered what she had told me as she left the dining room. The contract I had trapped her with already didn’t allow her to rest in the evening. Instead of making the pressure worse, I could spend the evening trying to figure out how to fix that flaw without getting her father’s signature.

Tomorrow was soon enough to tackle Marc’s lies.

SIXTEEN

ISABEL



I HADN'T EVEN finished breakfast by the time the node's magic began whispering at me, pulling me toward an unknown goal. I continued eating, wondering if this would be like the time Felix had unintentionally summoned me to the archives or like last night. While I had read Demeret in the spire room, the power had briefly tightened, but the tug had disappeared before I made it down even a single flight of stairs.

The power didn't fade. I swallowed my last sip of tea and left my sitting room. Removing just that single wingback chair had already made the space much more useable.

The power led down, so I made my way to the stairs. When I reached the ground floor, the pull leveled out. I knew exactly where it was taking me, because the magic flowed in the same direction as the nearest ley line. I headed into the great hall.

"It might actually be easier if you summoned me the way I did you," I told Felix when I spotted him curled up on the seat of one of the two chairs. "That way, I don't have to figure out where the magic is leading me."

"Damn it." The duke uncurled, arching his back and stretching. "I was going to wait until after you left your rooms before asking you to join me here. I didn't mean to summon you."

"Well, the node must have decided differently. Why did you want to see me?"

"A few reasons. First, I have two contracts I'd like you to sign. If you are willing, of course, but they are meant to make things easier for you, so if you have any objections, I'll gladly alter them."

I sat on the chair facing Felix. "What kind of contracts?"

He plucked at the air with a claw twice, and two pieces of paper fell onto my lap. I picked up the first one. It was an addendum to the contract my father had signed. “I thought you said we needed my father to change my contract, since he signed in his own name as well as mine.”

“To make changes, yes. But this isn’t a change so much as a clarification. And since the terms being defined only affect you and me, I think we can sign without your father and the node will recognize it.”

I read through the contract. The goal was obvious. Felix was trying to limit the hours I would be forced to work toward breaking his curse. Since the node currently allowed me to eat and sleep, it stood to reason that there was wiggle room in those terms.

Without thinking about it, I listened for a familiar strand of node magic, humming to match it. I envisioned the copy of the contract I had seen once before, and it materialized in my lap. I looked down at it and realized what I had done. “That is a very useful spell. And very easy to get accustomed to.”

“You summoned without the invocation.”

“I recognize which whisper of power goes with that enchantment. I told you it was a talent of mages to start enchantments without using the programmed triggers.”

His tail flicked. “I know, but it took me months to do that.”

I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t even know you were a mage.”

He sighed. “It is still annoying to see how quickly you mastered the skill. Though, I suppose I should be thankful, because the better you are at magic, the higher your chances of breaking my curse.”

I made a sound of agreement, most of my attention on the contract and addendum in my lap. Another hum provided me with a pen and ink. I began marking up Felix’s addendum.

He craned his neck, as if that would give him the ability to see the paper from where he was. “You don’t approve of my terms?”

“I’m trying to make sure the addendum works as intended. Given the original terms of the contract, some of your phrasings don’t make sense.”

“You summoned the original contract?”

“Just the copy Marc already showed me.” I paused. “Why didn’t you summon his copy of your contract before? You can’t summon the original, but you didn’t have to resort to physically digging through his desk.”

“I didn’t summon it because I wasn’t certain exactly where he had it stored. If I didn’t know where it came from, I couldn’t send it back. The enchantments on the castle won’t move it while it is in his desk, but if I left it out, who knows where it might have gotten filed?”

“Ah.” I read over the addendum once more, then signed my name on the bottom. I held it out. “Here, see if you have any problems with my changes, then you can sign and pass it through the node.”

Felix hopped off his chair. He looked up at where I had the inkwell balanced. “Ink please. I’ll sign this.”

“You haven’t even read it.”

“I doubt you could do much damage altering this addendum without encountering the issue of needing your father to sign before it could work. Even without reading, I trust that you improved my phrasings and nothing more.”

I placed the paper on the ground with the inkwell next to it. Did he truly trust me, or was he simply confident that I could cause no harm? Hadn’t he learned by now that even seemingly straightforward statements left plenty of room for interpretation? “The whole addendum is about defining terms of service and expectations. I could have attempted to slip in a clause about remuneration. That might have worked. Then you’d be stuck paying me half a gold for every week I’m here.”

Felix finished signing his name. “Read the other contract I gave you.”

He grabbed the corner of the paper between his teeth and leapt into the flames of the node. He moved before I realized what he intended, and I missed my chance to touch the node and read the truth of the words. It might have told me something about how much Felix genuinely regretted what he had done, and how much was just a ploy to win me over.

After a moment, the paper dissolved. A new scroll, bound by the magic of the node, had been added to the archives. The node could now only tug at me to break the curse during limited hours.

I picked up the second contract Felix had called in earlier. This was a fresh contract. While it related to the one that kept me trapped in Rose Castle, the terms were all independent of that original contract.

“A gold per week?” I dropped the paper, staring at Felix, who had jumped back to the floor. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“I’m serious. Do you have any idea how hard it is to write a contract when you are a cat? I didn’t go to that much effort just to mess with you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You started messing with me at our very first meeting. You’d enjoy it even if it took considerable effort.”

His ear twitched. “I find arguing with you to be a pleasant diversion. That isn’t the same as literally scratching out a contract solely to tease you.”

“Changing only the amount wouldn’t be much effort. I find it hard to believe you mean to offer me a gold per week. When I suggested that I might have added a payment clause to the addendum, I thought I was being ridiculous by saying half a gold per week. I only make a single gold per month working for the constables.”

Felix cocked his head to the side. “Did you put that in the addendum, by the way? I figured a separate contract was safer, but you are right, it might have worked.”

“What would you do if I had? Shred this contract with your claws?”

“No. But it would be good to know how much I owe you, so I don’t accidentally short-change you. The node does not make things pleasant if someone tries to break the terms of their contracts.”

“You’d pay me a gold and a half per week without complaint?”

“It seems like you are the one who likes to argue for the pleasure of it.” He grabbed the paper from where it had fallen and leapt onto the arm of my chair, setting it in my lap. Then he leapt—or perhaps fell—back to the floor. “You can’t possibly object. I owe you more than gold. I can’t reverse my mistakes, and you are the one paying the price. Offering you a bit of gold in return is the least I can do.”

So that was his game.

A part of me wanted to rip up the contract. I’d shout that he couldn’t buy my forgiveness and storm off in righteous fury. Then I remembered that I might not have a job when I returned home. Felix should pay me for my time. Also, I probably wouldn’t be able to storm off in a huff because the node power would keep me here until Felix no longer needed me.

I signed the contract. Dropping it on the floor in front of the duke, I crossed my arms. “This doesn’t mean I forgive you.”

He dipped a claw in ink. “I wouldn’t dream otherwise.”

I waited until this contract, too, had faded away, the node’s power making it impossible to break. I glared at the duke. “Is that all?”

Felix laughed. “I didn’t expect you to forgive me, but are you really madder at me now than yesterday?”

No, I wasn't. And that was what made me angry. I should hate Felix. Even if I sympathized with the horrible situation he had been in, that didn't mean I approved of his choices. But the more time I spent with him, the more I saw that he wasn't a bad person. He had faced the possibility of his actions leading to wars that could tear apart the world and done what he thought he needed to do.

I couldn't bring myself to deny Felix's claim, but the truth-telling enchantment wouldn't let me confirm it, either. "You said you had a few reasons to summon me. What else, besides the contracts?"

Felix watched me for a moment, then shook his whole body and jumped back onto the chair. "I need your help to understand the colors I see when I truth-read."

"You want to know how much I meant it when I signed that I would work reasonable hours and accept money for my efforts?"

"I want to understand what I sense. You can determine so much with your power, but I don't even understand what the colors I see mean."

"The colors are created by your mind interpreting the magic. I can't tell you what the colors mean. You need to listen to your instincts."

"All my instincts say is if a color is a good sign or not. I need more specifics."

"And how am I supposed to help you? Even if I saw the truth as colors, they wouldn't be the same as what you see."

"No, but you already know how to interpret the sounds you hear. We can cross reference what I see with what you hear." He swatted at the air, and a dozen pieces of paper landed in my lap. "I already wrote out several statements to test. You can hold them to the node and tell me what the sounds you hear mean, so I know what the colors I see mean."

I looked at the first paper. "You don't need me for this. You already know how true these statements are."

"I don't want to miss something. You hear more nuances of truth than I even knew existed. Plus, I really want to see a few colors in particular, but have no idea if any of these statements will work. I assume you will be better at coming up with what I missed if that proves to be the case."

"Gold and flattery. This is turning out to be quite the morning for me."

Felix snorted. "That was hardly flattery."

"Oh? What would you call it?"

"The truth."

This time I snorted. “All right, you’ve convinced me that I need to teach you the difference between truth and *truth*. Let’s get started.”

I stood up, gripping the papers tightly. I read the top one and raised a brow. “You are really working hard to get on my good side today, aren’t you? You realize this could backfire?”

Felix licked a paw and ran it over his whiskers. “It won’t.”

I held the first paper to the flames, hearing the harmonious yet complex chimes of an opinion masquerading as a truth. “See? The node doesn’t agree that I am beautiful.”

Felix continued to groom himself. “It didn’t disagree either. I saw a periwinkle shade. That is a shade of blue, not orange.”

“It is a shade of purple.”

“It is closer to blue. Therefore, it was closer to the truth. Or are my instincts about the color wrong? You said I should trust my instincts, didn’t you? Did you change your mind already?”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s a reason it wasn’t an actual shade of blue. An opinion, by nature, cannot be true or false. But because you wrote this, it is read as closer to truth than a lie.” Which meant that Felix believed it to be true, which surprised me, though he had said something similar before.

I knew what I looked like. I had an identical twin whom I had seen nearly every day of my life before coming to Rose Castle. We were, at best, cute. Though no one was foolish enough to call me that. Thank all the gods. But no one called me beautiful, either. I didn’t have the height or slender curves to pull off beautiful.

Perhaps from the vantage point of a cat, I looked different? I pushed the thought away. What did it matter if Felix thought I was beautiful? Knowing he did shouldn’t send a gentle warmth through my entire body.

Shaking my head, I plucked the next paper from the stack. I read the statement and frowned.

Isabel Cardh didn’t drink wine at breakfast.

I waved the paper at Felix. “Are you trying to determine if I’m a drunkard? Why, in Tsy’s name, is this one of your test statements?”

“Please, just hold it to the node. I need to see something specific.”

I shoved the paper into the flames, still glaring at Felix. “What could make you need to see the truth of this?”

Gold-green eyes focused on the flames, then he slumped.

I crossed my arms. The node rang out that he believed the statement to be true, and it upset him? “Explain.”

He sighed. “I needed a statement about someone else that I knew would be false even without witnessing it happen. But it was the same color as the last one.”

“Since you signed it, the node can only read it as an opinion. Here, I’ll show you the difference.” I tore the bottom of the paper and rewrote the statement, adding the words “I believe” in front. I let Felix sign it and held it to the flames.

This time I heard the trio of bells that signaled a pure truth. “See? Now the statement itself is about what you believe. It is true that this is your opinion, whether or not it is true that I didn’t drink wine at breakfast.”

“Damn it. That doesn’t help. I need to see the truth of a statement that isn’t an opinion, but also is a misdirection. Like when you wrote out that your father is amazing, but didn’t mean it as a compliment. Except the color was slightly different.”

“Misdirections are harder to sense in isolation. You could say the exact same thing at different times and I would hear different bells—if I could read you, that is. If you want to hear misdirections, it is easiest to do in response to questions.”

“Then I’ll ask you questions.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think that will work with the charm on the node. Each paper would still be read in isolation.”

“I won’t use the charm. I’ll truth-read your verbal responses.”

I gaped. “You aren’t a truth-reader. You . . . you can’t be. It is a passive power. There is no way you could have missed being a mage all these years. You’d have been reading everyone all the time.”

“I’m not a truth-reader,” Felix agreed. He looked over at the flames flickering back and forth. “But the node seems to have that power. I used it on Marc by accident last night.”

I shuffled over to my chair, suddenly needing to sit. “I suppose that explains my awareness of the node’s power. I thought it was just so damn powerful, and since it is tied to a truth magic, I had enough affinity to sense it. But if it is also tied to truth-reading, that makes more sense.”

Felix’s nose twitched. “That makes more sense to you? I’m still struggling with this discovery. A node can’t be locked to more than one

power. Even if another of my ancestors with a blood-tie to the node had been a truth-reader, they wouldn't have been able to infuse their power into the lock."

"No. You're right. Only one person can lock a node, and then its power is shaped."

A passage from Demeret flashed into my memory. It had been a random anecdote I had stumbled across the night before. I had read the section several times, hoping there would be a detail that could confirm my theory that the first Duke of Truthhold had actually made the node itself into a truth-charm. The passage had centered on a Mriskan mage who needed to use both copper and rubies together to make his charms, a combination that would ruin most mage's attempts to imbue power into the charm.

But while I had focused on the abnormal material, I had ignored the reason that the mage needed it.

"Dual power," I whispered. "Duke Valois was a dual power mage."

"That's impossible." Felix studied me, his tail twitching. "Isn't it?"

"Rare is not the same as impossible. I read about a dual power mage in Demeret. He mentioned the fact that though both of the mage's powers were inanimate, he somehow affected people with them. He theorized that the two powers amplified each other and created a new power, rather than just being distinct talents. Sounds a lot like what happens in Rose Castle, doesn't it?"

How had I missed that? Truth magics were animate, yet the node sealed contracts and read written statements. It seemed so obvious now. Then again, if it were that obvious, Felix should have known. His family had been tied to the node for generations.

"How did you not know you could truth-read using the node before now?" I asked.

SEVENTEEN

FELIX



“DON’T LOOK AT me like that!” My tail puffed out. Isa looked at me like I had either been lying to her this whole time or I was the biggest idiot alive. I paced in front of the node. “No one in the family has known. Do you have any idea how many of my ancestor’s journals I’ve read in the past months? Not a single one has mentioned using the node for truth-reading, including Valois’s son.”

“Yet you did it accidentally last night.”

I stopped, facing her. “I was thinking about how much I wished I could have had your insights as I talked to Marc, and I pulled on the node power. I’m guessing most of my ancestors haven’t wished they could truth-read while at Rose Castle, since it mostly seems superfluous.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me to stay if you wanted my insights?”

Damn it. I didn’t want to tell her. Not when I still didn’t understand what it meant that Marc claimed Edwin hadn’t signed the contract. It was a truth, but it didn’t explain why Isa’s father left her trapped here.

I moved back to the chair facing Isa. “It doesn’t really matter now, does it? You weren’t there. Now I need help to interpret what I saw.”

“Then tell me what Marc said.”

“I need to understand the colors I saw, not go over his words.”

Isa’s brows came together. “It will be a lot easier if you tell me about the conversation. That way I have a feel for what sorts of misdirections he might have employed and can do the same thing while you truth-read me to test my theories. Why don’t you want to tell me about it? You know I can’t betray your secrets. Or does this have nothing to do with breaking the curse?”

I sighed. “Fine, but remember that I tried to spare you.”

“Just tell me already.”

“I sent Marc to Leort with a contract for your father to sign that would free you from helping me break the curse.”

Isa inhaled sharply, then let the breath out slowly, her shoulders dropping. “He refused to sign?”

“That’s what I’m trying to understand. Marc didn’t even mention that Edwin hadn’t signed when he dropped off the contracts I need to witness. The contract simply wasn’t there. So, after supper, I asked him about it. All he said was that your father didn’t sign and didn’t tell Marc why. But from what I saw, it wasn’t a fully true answer to my questions. I just don’t understand how he was misleading me.”

To my surprise, Isa let out a relieved breath. “At least there is still a chance my father isn’t as much of a bastard as it sounded like a moment ago.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that your contract with Marc didn’t require him to deliver the contract to Edwin.”

I quickly went over everything Marc had said since returning from Leort in my head. He had never said he gave Edwin the contract. Perhaps Isa’s father hadn’t signed because he never saw it. And Isa figured that all out without even needing to truth-read the secretary.

“Why would Marc refuse to deliver the contract?” I said aloud, though mostly I was asking myself. “He is clearly not working in my best interests, but why would he want to keep you trapped here?”

Isa’s teeth sank into her lower lip, leaving me to battle very inconvenient—and impossible—thoughts. I had dreamed of regaining my human form with more frequency and fervor since she had arrived at Rose Castle.

She met my eyes. “Who suggested using the phrase ‘younger daughter’ when you wrote my contract?”

I blinked. “Marc. He pointed out that names can be tricky things in a contract and defining a relationship would be more exact.”

Isa nodded, clearly expecting my answer. “All right, I still don’t know why, but Marc wanted me here from the beginning. Or at least he didn’t want Sofia.”

“What makes you so sure? Didn’t you say lots of people mistake you for the older twin?”

“They do. But when I met Marc for the first time, he called me Isabel. You hadn’t introduced me. Unless you told him the evening before about what had happened?”

I shook my head. I hadn’t even noticed that Marc knew her name, and I knew I hadn’t told him. Isa caught all the slips I ignored. “You don’t miss much, do you?”

Isa laughed. “I miss plenty, but not usually the little details that keep a story from adding up. Instead, I miss things like my sister’s birthday.”

My ears pricked forward. “Wouldn’t it be the same as yours?”

She nodded. “Twice,” she admitted. “I’ve forgotten twice.”

“Just to clarify, did you also forget it was your birthday on those occasions?”

She pressed her lips together for a moment, then shook her head.

I laughed. “How did Sofia react?”

Isa’s lips twitched. “In typical Sofia fashion, with complete understanding and an apology for not reminding me.”

“And since the second time, does she now remind you every year?”

“Oh no, she knows it would embarrass me if she had to keep reminding me. Instead, she always gets someone else to bring it up in conversation with me a week before and the day of.”

“Uh, wouldn’t that be more embarrassing?”

“Absolutely. But Sofia doesn’t realize I know she puts those people up to it.”

“Let me guess, you’d tell her, but then she’d feel so bad she wouldn’t continue the reminders and you are afraid you still need them?”

“You catch on quick.”

A purr rumbled through my throat for an instant before the words suddenly stabbed at me. I might understand Isa, but I had overlooked so much when it came to Marc. I still wasn’t catching on where he was concerned. “Why do you think he is doing this?”

Isa followed my mental jump without hesitation. “I don’t know. You depend on him for contact with the outside world, but he is still only an intermediary. Perhaps he thinks you will give him more authority if the curse lasts much longer?”

“That could explain him wording the contract to bring you here instead of Sofia, if he thinks a truth-teller is more likely to break the curse.

It doesn't explain why he wouldn't take the opportunity to send you away, though. Even if you can't break the curse, you are still helping me."

"Maybe we should ask him."

"Even with the truth-telling enchantment and your talent at truth-reading, I don't know that we'll get the answers we need. Marc will talk around everything like he usually does, and if we push too hard, he'll refuse to answer at all. I'd rather he not know how much I distrust him unless I am guaranteed to get answers."

"Then use the node to guarantee those answers. Truth-telling can force a person to speak. If you can draw on the node to truth-read, then you can draw on it to make Marc answer our questions."

She was right. That was the basic function of a node-tie, after all. It gave anyone in the correct bloodline access to a particular shape of magic, whether or not they were a mage. So long as I was within range of the node, which extended far beyond the enchantments on the castle hillside, I was the most powerful truth-teller on the continent.

But I had intended to use the node's power that way last night if needed and ended up truth-reading Marc instead. What if I tried and failed? It didn't matter that I had used the power when I was younger; it wasn't a skill I practiced. So much of magic was based on instinct and I didn't trust my instincts currently.

Questioning Marc with the assumption that I could force him to speak and then failing could be worse than questioning him without planning to use the power at all. But I knew he'd evade my questions if I didn't use the magic.

I looked over at Isa, then finally admitted the truth. "I'm not sure how to use the node to truth-tell."

She raised a brow. "Looking at me won't help. Try. Pull on the power, but focus on truth-telling instead of reading this time."

I tried. I tried over and over, but rather than pure node power, I pulled on the strands of power already tied to Truths. I summoned food, and furniture, and, in one surprising instance, a pile of stones.

Isa grabbed one of the green stones, turning it over in her fingers. "Are these uncut emeralds?"

I inspected the pile, batting the stones around to catch the light at different angles. Many pieces of family jewelry were set with emeralds,

but I didn't know why there would be a cache of uncut stones anywhere in the castle. Still, "I think they are."

Isa instantly returned the one she had inspected to the collection I had spread across the floor, snatching her hand back like she was afraid I'd accuse her of theft if she touched it for even a heartbeat longer.

I batted it across the floor back to her foot. "Take it."

"What?"

"Take it. Consider it overtime pay. Or an apology. Both."

"I can't take an emerald!"

"It's not like I'll miss it. I didn't even know I owned it. You could take the whole pile, and I wouldn't care."

"I'm not taking a pile of jewels."

"I figured, which is why I'm only trying to give you one."

She hesitated.

I sat back. "Consider it a gamble. Maybe it is an emerald, and maybe it is just a green rock."

I was certain, however. Those were emeralds. Ones that hadn't been called in with the general summoning enchantment. I hadn't recognized the strand of power I had accidentally pulled on in that last attempt to truth-tell. But I'd know it if I saw it again.

Reluctantly, Isa bent down and picked up the stone. She looked at me for a moment before slipping it into her pocket. Then she crossed her arms. "Well, clearly it is going to take more time before you master truth-telling. I don't think you need me until you can consistently pull on the node itself, so I'll resume my research."

EIGHTEEN

ISABEL



As I FELL asleep, I remembered talking to Felix about the Contract of Inheritance, the only type of scroll Marc had shown him with a single signature. My study of Demeret was teaching me plenty, but not about the peculiarities of the Truthhold node. Even knowing that it had been locked by a dual-power mage didn't help. So, I decided to visit Marc the next morning and ask to see the Contract of Inheritance he had located.

Perhaps I'd see something Felix had missed. Given his record at missing loopholes in the wordings of contracts, it wasn't a ridiculous plan. And, so long as I was in the basement, I'd study the magic in the archives, too. Knowing that there was an element of truth-reading in how the scrolls were created made me curious if I could sense something I had missed when Felix and I mapped the maze made by the shelves.

I attempted to use the node's power to transport myself directly to the archives after I ate breakfast, but either I wasn't using the correct invocation, or that Truth only worked to bring someone else to the speaker. With a sigh, I went downstairs the usual way.

"Isa," Marc greeted me with a practiced smile. "What can I do for you this morning?"

"His Grace mentioned a scroll you had found for him, and I was hoping to study it myself." Some instinct warned me not to refer to the duke as Felix around the secretary. I didn't want him to know that I no longer fought the need to help break the curse or that I was no longer mad at the duke for bringing me to Rose Castle.

Did I still think he had made a terrible error in judgment? Absolutely, but I understood the pressures he had been facing. The need to prevent a new round of node wars, the fear that he'd never regain his human form, and most likely the manipulation by the secretary he thought was helping

him had pushed him to make a horrible choice. But he tried to fix his mistake, and after everything, I was beginning to think that maybe I could forgive him.

Plus, the flattery, gold, and emerald didn't hurt. Under the circumstances, I wasn't above accepting a bit of bribery as an apology. My cheeks warmed as I remembered the delicate chimes I had heard when I held the paper stating that Felix thought I was beautiful to the bone. That hadn't been empty flattery.

"What scroll?" Marc asked, jolting me back into the present.

Tsy save me, I was not some blushing ingenue, to be distracted by a simple compliment. "A Contract of Inheritance."

"Of course. Did His Grace also mention that he found nothing of use in that contract? It was one he was already familiar with, having signed one himself."

My focus sharpened. Felix had found nothing of interest, but Marc hadn't suffered the same limitation, it seemed. "He did mention that. Still, I'd like to look at it for myself." I stood up. "Actually, can you show me where it is? Knowing where it is filed in the archives might help, too."

"I don't think you will learn anything from where it is filed." Marc was telling the truth, but there was still a discordant note under his words. He didn't think I'd learn anything, but he still didn't want to show me. "The archives are a little claustrophobic. You'll be more comfortable waiting out here."

"Narrow passages don't bother me." I gestured toward the archives. "Lead the way."

Marc stood, clearly out of excuses, and walked toward the shelf-filled corner of the room. I wondered why he didn't want me to enter the archives with him. It wasn't because he was afraid I was claustrophobic. Though I wasn't usually one for small talk, I figured in this instance I should consider such a conversation part of questioning a suspect. Still walking behind Marc, I tried to sound only mildly interested when I asked, "What were you doing before I interrupted?"

He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Working."

His contract with Felix required him to show any single signature truth scrolls he found after signing, but did not actually require him to search for those scrolls. Felix didn't want to tip his hand and let Marc know that he suspected the secretary was working against him, but I

wasn't Felix. I had already questioned Marc about hiding his knowledge of a Truth from the duke. Pushing more wouldn't betray that Felix knew something was going on.

"I thought your job is to find scrolls for F— His Grace." I mentally cursed at my near slip. Hopefully, Marc hadn't noticed. "How are you finding scrolls while sitting at your desk?"

Marc followed the twists of the archives without hesitation. I lost my sense of how to exit within moments. Not that it mattered. Even if the secretary decided to strand me among the rows of scrolls, I could summon Felix and get him to lead me out.

Not that I expected Marc to go that far. He still thought he could deceive me, despite my magic.

"I must also read many scrolls. I don't spend every moment of the day in the archives."

I didn't bother to point out that he hardly needed to read the scrolls if he was really doing what Felix had asked. He only needed to look at the signatures on the bottom of a scroll and then move on. Asking a few questions as I followed him had made sense, but it wasn't the reason I had insisted he take me through the archives.

I wanted to get a feel for the magic on the scrolls. The secretary finally slowed, informing me that the scroll was in this section, but he wasn't positive exactly which cubby, so it might take him a minute to locate it. I took the time to concentrate on the spells woven into parchment. Or maybe there was no parchment, just magic? There were certainly enough whispers of power around me to believe that the scrolls were nothing more than a manifestation of magic.

I ran my fingers over the nearest scroll, trying to tease out the notes that made up this one piece of the archives. The problem was, everything was the same note. Every wisp of power had the same pitch, too sharp for pure truth-telling, too flat for truth-reading. But there wasn't just one sound. The power came in different tempos and timbres, overwhelming my senses, though no single strand was powerful enough that I could even hear it without concentrating.

I thought the scroll under my hand had a rich timbre. Or maybe it was the buzzy sound that left a pins and needles sensation in my fingertips. I pulled my hand back, flexing my fingers. I didn't know what I was sensing.

“Aha.” Marc pivoted away from the shelf, brandishing a half-unfurled scroll at me. “Here it is.”

I accepted it from him, mildly surprised he had given it to me at all. I had expected him to make an excuse about not finding it, especially after he warned me it might take a bit. If he had, I would have accepted the excuse and made my way back to this shelf later, since he hadn’t lied when he said it was nearby.

It was probably for the best that I didn’t need to resort to such measures, I realized as we made our way out of the archives. Even without the distraction of conversation, it was hard to memorize the path we took through the shelves.

When we exited the maze, I considered following Marc back to his desk and asking some pointed questions. A few wouldn’t be an issue, but if I pushed too far, I might ruin Felix’s plans. So, I wouldn’t settle in for an interrogation, but perhaps I could startle a single answer out of him.

“What was the last contact you had with Lady Cecily?”

Mark jerked around to face me, his face pale. “What? What makes you think I’m in contact with her?”

Tsy save me. Until that moment, I hadn’t truly thought he was. I had simply hoped to surprise a straight answer out of him about how he knew she hadn’t always had a tie to the node. There would be no straight answers coming now, but that was all right. His reaction had already told me more than I would have thought to ask.

“That’s not what I said,” I murmured placatingly. “His Grace said you found him after the transformation. I wondered if you had run into Lady Cecily as she fled the castle.”

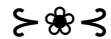
Thank goodness I had enough unanswered questions floating around my head that my words were the truth. If I managed to misdirect even half so skillfully as Marc, I wouldn’t ruin Felix’s chance at demanding answers once he mastered truth-telling.

“I was too shocked when I realized what had happened to notice much else.”

Marc hadn’t answered my question, but he had told me the truth. Even if he was working with Lady Cecily, he hadn’t expected the duke’s transformation.

I nodded and lifted the contract wrapped in my fingers between us. “Thank you for finding this for me. I’ll see you at luncheon.”

I had lots to think about before then.



BY THE TIME I reached the library spire room, I had decided that all I could do about Marc was tell Felix my suspicion that he was working with Lady Cecily. It would be up to him to ask the rest of the questions. Of course, I planned to share my thoughts on what he should ask. But that would have to wait.

I couldn't sit back and do nothing until Felix figured out his power, however. So, I'd stick with my original plan for the morning. I settled on my favorite chaise in the spire room and unrolled the Contract of Inheritance.

The contract Truthholder heirs were required to sign was far more involved than I had expected. In my experience, the adage "with power comes responsibility" was rarely accurate. "With power *should* come responsibility" tended to better sum up the situation. But for the Duke—or Duchess—of Truthhold, not only responsibilities but also limitations were imposed before they could enjoy the privileges of their rank.

Though it was a contract for the heir, the stipulations listed within were all about after the signee assumed the title. The titleholder must remain within node lands—not the duchy, but the area within the node's radius of influence—for at least half of every year.

I scribbled a note in my journal, reminding me to ask Felix how far the node lands extended. It couldn't be just the hillside where the Truth enchantments were active. The Truthhold node was the most powerful on the continent; the power must extend for miles.

I set my journal aside and continued reading. Not only was Felix required to live at Truthhold for at least half of the year, but if he left for more than three days, he had to designate another person with a node-tie to act as his proxy. The proxy had to sign another contract that was essentially a more limited and temporary version of the one I was reading.

There were several more clauses detailing a code of conduct for the Truthhold liege. Most of it consisted of vague, generic ethical constraints that sounded good, but left plenty of room for interpretation. Given that the original contract had been written hundreds of years ago, that was probably for the best. But it meant that despite signing a contract just like this, Felix had been able to use his power to force me to Rose Castle.

I pushed the thought aside, and read the contract again, this time taking notes on certain turns of phrase, and trying to figure out what Marc thought he had seen that the duke had missed. An hour later, I had a list of questions for Felix, but no sense that I had discovered anything helpful.

It was a little before noon, so I spent the next quarter hour analyzing the magic clinging to the scroll.

The same pitch as everything I had heard in the archives, the power beat against my senses in a steady tempo that reminded me of the bells I heard when someone made a promise they weren't sure they could keep, but were determined to try. I knew that truth-reading an inanimate object was beyond my power, but I didn't discount my instincts. The node truth-read contracts; it made sense that the reading lingered on the scrolls created through the node.

If I was right, then I might be able to find the scroll with Lady Cecily's curse.

I remembered the overwhelming feel of the magic in the archives and winced. Maybe not. It was easy, with only a single scroll, to discern the steady tempo and hear the brassy timbre of the magic, but once I was surrounded by thousands of scrolls, following a single whisper of power would be nearly impossible, even if I knew what I was listening for.

NINETEEN

FELIX



THE INSTANT MARC left the dining room after luncheon, Isa leaned forward. “I need to tell you something I learned about Marc today.”

I cocked my head to the side. “You questioned him? I thought we planned to wait until I could force his answers.”

“I went down to the archives and asked him for a copy of a Contract of Inheritance. Then I followed up on something I had sensed during my last conversation with him, just an off-hand question to see how he responded. But I learned more than I expected.”

“You’re starting to worry me with how long it is taking you to get to the point.”

“He’s working with Lady Cecily.”

I stilled, almost wishing she had taken longer to work up to telling me. I had barely come to terms with the fact that Marc was untrustworthy—lazy at best and actively working against me at worst—accepting that he might be partially responsible for my curse was almost too much. Except I’d believe Isa over him—or my own instincts—any day.

“Explain please,” I said after only a heartbeat of hesitation.

Isa told me about her conversations with Marc, what he had said, what she had sensed. The damning conclusions she had drawn.

I took it all in. “He never actually told you when he had last been in contact with her, then?”

“No. I’d bet he saw her before going into the great hall and finding you transformed. But he has almost certainly been in contact with her since then, given his reaction to my question. Does he go to Leort often?”

“Every couple of weeks to buy supplies and pick up the contracts I need to witness.” I stood, my tail lashing. “Come on. I think I figured out how to tap into the node’s power instead of the Truths floating around this

morning. I need to practice truth-telling now, so I can question Marc as soon as possible.”

I led the way to the great hall. We didn’t need to be there, I could reach the node’s power from anywhere in the castle and well beyond, but it felt right to practice my truth-telling with her sitting in the wingback chair that still stood next to the marble plinth and its bowl of fire.

Isa settled into one of the chairs, relaxing against the back rather than perching on the edge. She hummed, summoning a leather-bound journal to her hand. “I also have a few questions for you about the heir’s contract.”

A purr rumbled through me and I leapt onto the other seat. “Why am I not surprised that you have questions for me when we came here so I could question you?”

She grinned. “We’ll take turns. You try to truth-tell me, then I’ll ask you a question.”

“Fine. I go first. Just let me get a grip on the node power.” I focused, pulling on the strand of power I had discovered that was somehow both pure white and highlighted in bright blue. No matter where I stood, that strand always seemed to come out of my back, tying me directly to the node.

The strand of power thickened, and I switched from watching it to Isa. “What is your name?”

She pressed her lips together and said nothing.

I released the power. “Damn it.”

She tapped a finger against her lip, completely unaware of how distracting such a simple motion could be. “Next time, hold the power a little longer. If you still don’t force me to talk, I’ll answer anyway a moment later to see if you are at least constraining what I can say at all.”

I pulled my thoughts back into line. I needed to focus on the words, not the lips forming them. “How will we know? There is already a truth-telling enchantment on the castle.”

“What have I told you about the truth?”

I sighed. “It’s not black and white. I still don’t understand what you hope to prove, though.”

Isa leaned forward. “You can call me Sofia.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I admit that is a useful way to sidestep my question and give an answer that isn’t technically a lie, but if I’m not forcing you to answer, can’t you still do that?”

She shook her head. “Not if you put enough power behind the truth-telling. Sofia can’t force me to answer, but she has enough power to make it so that if I choose to answer, I must answer the question asked. So, if you manage that, then we know you are pushing beyond the enchantment on the castle, even if you aren’t forcing me to answer.”

“All right. I believe it is your turn for a question now.”

She looked down at the journal in her lap. “How far is the node’s sphere of influence? It must extend for miles, so why don’t the Truths work beyond this hill?”

“Technically, that is two questions.”

She scowled at me.

I felt myself purring, almost soundlessly, once more. I had been a cat for over two months and not purred once. Now I saw Isa, and it happened automatically. “First question: The node’s power extends nearly all the way to Leort and well into the Gaboor Mountains. As for why the Truths only cover the hillside, the first duke limited their scope, purposefully keeping them from working throughout the node’s sphere of influence. According to his son’s journal, Valois didn’t want to attract undue attention. After seeing what happened with a few of his first experiments, he made it so that no other Truths would work beyond castle grounds.”

When I had read about it, my first reaction had been to scoff that Valois thought limiting the Truths to the castle would prevent people from noticing what was happening at his home. Isa, naturally, noticed something entirely different.

“What Truths did he make that extend beyond the hill?”

“I already answered two questions. You don’t get a third yet.” Not that I could answer that question. It hadn’t even occurred to me to wonder. I had gotten too used to accepting the miracles performed by the node and not caring if it could do anything more.

“Fine. Your turn.”

I pulled on the magic tethering me to the node again. “What is your name?”

Isa said nothing. I continued to hold the magic, and after a moment, she nodded. Her mouth opened, but no words came out. She fought to form her reply, her lips twisting as her will and the power warred to make her say different things. Finally, she snapped her jaw closed.

I released my hold on the node. “So, I am doing something.”

Isa nodded. "That was more powerful than Sofia. Once I tried to answer, it was very difficult to keep from saying anything. The words wanted to come out."

"But you weren't compelled to answer."

"No."

"That is still progress, I suppose. Your turn."

She didn't return to her questions about the Truths Valois had written. With another glance at her journal, she jumped onto a new topic entirely.

"Who passed your Contract of Inheritance through the node?"

"I was the witness, so I passed it through the node myself. That's one of the requirements in the contract."

"I know, but I don't understand how—" she cut herself off with a sigh and propped her chin on her hand. The firelight glinted against her brown hair, tinting the strands auburn. "Your turn."

"Finish your thought." I curled up on the seat of my chair, wrapping my tail around my body. "I don't actually care about taking turns asking questions."

"You're certain? I know you want to question Marc sooner rather than later."

"Yes, but I don't know what more to do than what I've already tried, so I'm not holding out hope my next question will achieve anything new. What don't you understand?"

"If you were only the heir when you signed the contract, then your father was still the primary node-tie holder. Wouldn't he have to witness the contract?"

"Not if he designated me as his proxy first. Valois wanted his heirs to follow strict rules when they inherited the duchy. To make sure no one could weasel out, he came up with the Contract of Inheritance, then made it so that the heir had to witness it himself so that there could be absolutely no way to invalidate it once the previous duke died. I'm not sure if he was afraid that contracts witnessed by one duke would only be enforced during that lifetime, or if it was a case of saying, 'See, there was no coercion, he signed it of his own free will.'"

"Wouldn't having only one signature make it easier to amend later? If you are the only signatory, you could write an addendum once you inherit to nullify the original contract." She frowned. "No wait, that's what the in perpetuity clause is about, isn't it?"

I nodded. "I cannot believe the magistrates in Leort are claiming you need to study law in Haiwella before you'll be qualified. You have a better grasp of legal contracts than me, and I've grown up literally surrounded by them."

Red colored her cheeks, and it wasn't a reflection of the flames. "But how many of them did you actually read before you were cursed?"

"How many did you read before coming to Rose Castle?" I countered.

She leaned forward. "I'm not going to answer unless you make me."

The challenge was silly, but I refused to let her win. This time, I yanked the node's magic to myself, then threw it out in front of me until I could see it shimmer in the air all around her. "How many contracts did you read before this week?" I demanded.

She fought to hold back her answer, but within two heartbeats, her lips parted. "Eight."

I dropped the power, feeling it snap back into the node. "Only eight? Really? What contracts were you reading?"

"Every contract available to the public in the Leort Town Archives. They were much drier than the ones I've read since coming here."

"To be fair, most of the contracts in my archives are probably just as dry. You've seen some of the most interesting ones."

Isa waved this away, grinning at me. "You did it, Felix. You forced me to tell the truth."

"I did. Let's make sure I can repeat that feat." I grabbed the node power again, pulling with as much metaphysical force as I had the last time. The magic flowed into me, but when I tried to blanket Isa in it, nothing happened.

Isa watched me, her grin fading as I continued to wrestle with the power instead of questioning her. "Is something wrong?"

"I can't get it to do the same thing as last time." I still had far more power answering my call than on the first attempts. Maybe that would be enough. "What is your name?"

Isa didn't answer.

I tried again and again, until pain pulsed behind my eyes, but I couldn't make her answer.

She told me to take a break when I could no longer hide my headache, reaching out to set her hand against my back when words alone didn't stop me. "You've pushed yourself too much. At this point, the odds of success

will only get worse. You need to rest. We can try again tomorrow when you aren't drained."

I wanted to arch into her touch. Instead, I released the magic. "How am I drained? I'm using node power, and there is plenty of that."

"But how you control that power comes from your own reserves. Trust me, Felix, you need to stop before you do more than give yourself a headache."

"Fine." My answer was begrudging, but there was no other answer I could give, because I did trust Isa.

TWENTY

ISABEL



THE MORE I read *Theory of All Magics*, the less I was convinced that the answer Felix needed was hidden in the pages of the book. I still wanted to read it. It was as fascinating as it was frustrating. But now that I had lost my conviction that Demeret had the answer, the node pulled me away if I tried to devote all my working hours to reading the book. I had a curse to break.

And no idea how to do it.

For a while, the node allowed me to explore the library. I tried to decode the magical system of organization, but even if I knew where to find certain books, what good would they do me? The answer Felix needed wouldn't be in a book, but a scroll. I didn't need to master magical theory or understand how the node had been locked. I needed to understand how Duke Valois had used the node to create Truths. There was no other node like the one at Truthhold, the power stretching beyond the accepted limits of magic. I'd find answers in the archives, not the library.

With the magic itching against my sternum, I sought out Felix. "I need you to get Marc out of the archives for an hour."

The duke looked up from the journal he was reading, his ears swiveling in my direction. "Why?"

"Because I want to explore the archives without him watching my every step and questioning my reasons for being down there. Can you keep him busy for an hour?"

"I'll ask him to transcribe my notes from this latest journal." Felix paused, his paw holding the journal open. "Better yet, you can go downstairs and tell him I require his services as a secretary."

"Perfect. I'll do that now."

I was more than halfway to the door when Felix spoke again. “You’re welcome.”

I glanced over my shoulder at him. “I believe that’s my line. I’m the one working to reverse the curse, after all.”

“I don’t get any credit for the help I’m providing?” He sounded amused rather than irked.

“I’ll say thank you when you do something that is neither an apology for the wrongs you have already committed nor an action that ultimately benefits you.” I turned back toward the door. Let him think I was still mad; it would be good for him.

He didn’t stop me this time as I left the office where he read.

I went downstairs, schooling my expression into one of annoyance, which was no longer my default after talking with the duke. Given Felix’s desire not to let Marc know that we were aware he was working against the duke, it would be best not to look too eager about getting him out of the archives. In fact, I’d follow him upstairs when he went. I’d make my way to the library, then double back downstairs after the secretary was in Felix’s office.

Marc sat at his desk, the light from the window streaming in and casting a warm golden glow over his hair. He had a single scroll unrolled on the desk, but though his eyes were trained on the parchment, they didn’t move back and forth like he was reading. The scroll granted the impression he was working, while allowing him to do nothing.

His head came up slowly when he heard the click of my shoes against the floor. “Isa. Did you find anything useful in the scroll I gave you yesterday?”

“It was an interesting read.” Let Marc wonder if I was hiding anything. “That’s not why I’m here this morning, though.”

“Oh?”

“His Grace sent me. He wants to write out some notes from his recent reading. He’s waiting for you in his office.”

Marc slowly re-rolled the scroll in front of him, then placed it in a drawer of his desk. “He made you play messenger, did he? You’d think, with so few of us here, he might forget to insist on the privileges of rank on occasion.”

Despite my magic, I wasn’t sure what Marc intended with that comment. There was genuine frustration behind his words, and a refusal to

see that Felix hardly insisted on the deference a duke might expect from his employees. I couldn't tell if it was because Felix tended to be more informal when he and I were alone and so Marc's impression of him did not match mine, or if he wanted to remind me of the gap in our ranks.

In my mind, having a title was an accident of birth and nothing more. Even if my introduction to the duke had happened under different circumstances, I still would have offered him only basic courtesy, not subservience.

"A duke is a duke," I told Marc, not wanting to delve deeper into the topic. "Even when he's a cat."

"I suppose so." The secretary walked around his desk and to my side. "How is your own work for the duke coming along?"

We began the walk to the stairs, our footsteps echoing through the room. "It is hard to say. I can't access the node. Even if I could, I am only a truth-reader. I have ideas, but I can't implement them myself."

The misdirections falling from my lips surprised me. I had always preferred blunt honesty, not seeing the need to skirt around an issue. Nor did I think a misdirection was any better morally than a lie. If I truly felt the need to deceive, I didn't usually bother with such careful phrasings. Nevertheless, I had enough experience listening to silver tongues mangling the truth that words came easily.

And despite his experience twisting the truth to his own ends, Marc did not expect the same of me. He took my answers at face value and let the conversation slide into silence.

I bid him farewell at the blue salon door. After waiting long enough for him to turn the next corner, I slipped back into the hall and returned downstairs.

Working with the constables, I had learned to never ignore a potential clue. It wasn't wise to focus only on finding the answers you already sought, when there might be a question you hadn't even known to ask. So, instead of going directly to the archives, I made my way to Marc's desk. I opened the left drawer and pulled out the scroll. I unrolled it, scanning over the lines until I was convinced it was a prop he used to make it look like he was working and nothing more. Only then did I return it to the drawer and make my way to the archives.

I pulled the map Felix and I had made from my pocket. I had drawn out a path to take me back to the area where Marc had pulled the heir's

contract from the shelves earlier. My memory of all the twists and turns was by no means perfect, but I thought this route would get me in the general area. It seemed as good a place as any to start my search.

Even consulting the map, I felt lost as I turned right and left, skipping that path, and following another shelf around in a way that I would have sworn I was making a circle if I didn't know better. Once I thought I was close, I closed my eyes and listened.

Magic surrounded me, but I refused to let it overwhelm me. I had held the heir's contract for quite a while the day before; I ought to recognize the sound. Even with so many threads of power in one place, even when they all resonated with the same pitch, they were still unique. When I concentrated on one, it became distinct, the rest blending together in my mind. Then I could shift my attention to the next strand, slowly working through them all. Eventually, I heard the whisper I was looking for. I followed the sound, tracing the path with my hand as I kept my eyes closed. Then my hand bumped against the wooden shelf and I opened my eyes. I was in the wrong row. The strand of power extended beyond the shelf.

I consulted my map and saw that it would only take three turns to reach the aisle behind this one. I hurried through, trying not to lose the strand of power, even when I had to go in the opposite direction before swinging back around. This time, when I followed the power, my hand landed on a scroll. I pulled it from the shelf, unrolled it, and confirmed it was the same scroll I had studied the day before.

My first experiment had been a success, but I needed to know if I could find other scrolls the same way. I pulled out a different scroll and focused on the magic. It didn't take long to identify the power wrapped around the scroll, but this time there were two strands: a mellow hum and one with a reedy timbre. I touched the next scroll over. Again, I heard two distinct threads of power twining together. The same on the one after that. Unrolling all three, I confirmed that each had been signed by two different parties in addition to the Truthholder duke who had witnessed the contracts. Two signatories, two strands of power.

Well, that explained the myriad of timbres I heard, but there were also different tempos and beats, everything echoing through my mind at the same pitch. If one person signed two contracts, would the rhythm differ?

I stepped away from the shelf, trying to get as much distance from the scrolls as I could in the narrow passageway. With my eyes closed, I sifted through the strands of power once more. I let more power wash over me this time, controlling the flow less. Several times I had to stop, blinking away the disorientation as too many wisps of power blended together. Eventually, I heard what I was looking for. Two strands of power with the exact same timbre. But though they shared a metallic tone, they pulsed at different tempos.

I followed the first, with a sort of da-da-dah beat that made me think of a truth spoken out of desperation. I had to consult my map over and over, but eventually I found the scroll tied to that strand of power. Next, I followed the strand with a quick beat that reminded me of a truth that hid a minor indiscretion that had quickly turned to regret. I wondered if I'd hear the same beat on the contract Felix had signed bringing me to Rose Castle.

It took longer to get to this one, the path taking me deeper into the labyrinth, but finally, I held both scrolls in my hands. I unrolled the first and studied the signatures. I unrolled the second, and there it was. Michel Rasbemon had signed both. The second party in each contract was a different person, and though the witness had been the same, I felt confident declaring that what I heard as the timbre of the magic imbued in each scroll corresponded to the person signing.

All I needed was a single Truth scroll, time, and a lot of patience, and I could track down any other truth scroll written by the same person. Assuming the Truth scrolls worked the same way.

I moved through the aisles of the archives, paying just enough attention that I could find my place on the map, and mulled it over. My hands trailed over the scrolls at hip height as I went. My magic manifested as sounds, but I had found that touch increased my sensitivity, as if it allowed the vibrations direct access to my magical ear. I listened to the power as I walked, even though I wasn't truly concentrating on the magic anymore.

My thoughts were occupied calculating the odds that Truth scrolls treated the signature the same way other scrolls treated the witness's signature—a means to imbue the node's power, and nothing more. The heir's contract had a distinct strand of power, but that was also a regular contract, though one signed by only one person. Would a Truth, imposing

the node's power on the environment and not the signatory, work the same?

I stopped, something nagging at my mind, an unrecognized thought demanding attention. I brushed my hand back and forth, trying to tease out the thought. Then my hand drifted back farther, hitting the same scroll it had been on when that thought first appeared. I closed my eyes to concentrate more easily on what the magic was telling me.

There was only one strand of power in the scroll, a note of crystalline purity that sounded like the node—except this bit of power pulsed at a quick tempo rather than continuing in an eternal, steady hum.

I snatched up the scroll and unrolled it. A quick read told me I had found a Truth. It hadn't been written by the first duke, however. The lone signature at the bottom read Sebastien, Second Duke of Truthhold.

I stared at the scroll, wondering if it was better or worse that I had found a Truth written by someone other than Duke Valois.

The sound of footsteps on stone carried over the shelves, and the scroll snapped shut as one hand rose to my mouth, muffling my gasp. I had taken too long. Marc was back.

With the Truth scroll held tightly in my grasp, I considered my options. Should I walk out of the archives and try to explain away my presence? Or I could refuse to tell Marc why I had gone hunting through the shelves on my own. Did it even matter? I hadn't wanted him to observe me as I worked, but my presence in the archives didn't need to be a secret.

Before I could decide, a sickening sense of the world dissolving washed over me. Except it wasn't the world dissolving, but me. Though dissolved, my stomach still existed, and it wasn't pleased with this development.

Then everything snapped back together.

I was in Felix's office, the duke sitting on the table in front of me, his ears pricked forward.

"You only asked for an hour. What was taking so long?"

TWENTY-ONE

FELIX



ISA WOBBLED, AND I remembered the disorientation of being summoned through the castle. Perhaps I should have given her a chance to sit before asking questions. But I had kept Marc out of the archives for well over an hour, and she still had shown no signs of exiting on her own. I couldn't have kept the secretary busy any longer without arousing suspicion.

I wanted to know if that meant she had found something. I wanted to know if the scroll held in her white-knuckled grip was the answer I needed.

With a swipe of a claw, I called in a mug of tea, making it appear at the edge of my desk, near the chair. "Sit, Isa. Have some tea."

She sat, her eyes still glassy, but as she stared at the steam rising from the mug, she seemed to come back to herself. "Oh, no. The summoning spell didn't leave my stomach behind, so I don't think tea is a good idea."

Maybe she wasn't completely back yet. "Wouldn't it be worse to drink tea without a stomach?"

"Given how I feel right now, I can't imagine not having a stomach could make anything worse. Why didn't you tell me how horrible being summoned is?"

"I found it a tad disorienting, but that was all. A moment of dizziness, then everything settled."

"I am not settling."

I got rid of the first mug of tea and called in a new one. "Ginger tea, then."

This time Isa reached for the tea, only then realizing she still had a scroll in one hand. She placed it carefully on the desk and wrapped both hands around the ceramic mug.

I placed a paw on the scroll, but didn't bother to unroll it. That was much harder than turning pages with a claw, I had found. "What did you find?"

She took a slow sip of tea, keeping the mug up near her face. "Signing a contract leaves a magical signature as well. If I listen to the power on one contract, I can find other contracts signed by the same person. The Truthholder who witnesses the contract doesn't leave behind the same signature, however."

"And this contract?"

"A Truth scroll. I'm not sure what to make of the power coming off it. It reminds me of pure node power, but it's not steady enough. I didn't get a chance to see if I could find the same magical signature anywhere else in the archives, though, because Marc came down right after I found it."

"I stalled him as long as I could."

She lowered the mug slightly and gave me a wan smile. "I know. That wasn't a complaint, just a fact."

I nodded and studied the scroll under my paw, trying to call up my magical sight. I could locate the strands I knew for Truths without trouble, but it was harder to scan my surroundings for magic in general. It required an odd mix of concentration and unfocusing of my sight. After a moment, though, I could see the power shimmering all over the scroll. It did look very similar to the power in the node.

I let the magical sight drop. "If the node is locked to Duke Valois's magic, and he wrote this scroll, it makes sense that the power would look the same."

Isa shook her head. "Valois didn't write this Truth. It was signed by Duke Sebastien."

I knew, from reading his journals, that Valois's heir had been able to make Truths. He complained about the grandiose spells his father cast, which tested the limits of magic but ignored the most pressing practicalities.

If my father had invented enchantments to keep the entire castle tidy, I wouldn't have complained about the fact that he forgot to put an exception on the nursery.

Especially if I could create my own Truths to handle any practicalities he overlooked.

I jumped to my feet, tugging on a strand of power and summoning one of Sebastien's journals to the table. I flipped through the pages as quickly as my claws allowed.

"What are you looking for?" Isa asked.

"Sebastien could create Truths."

Isa tapped the scroll. "So I gathered. That doesn't answer my question, though."

"He regularly created Truths that balanced out the ones his father made." I found the passage and scanned quickly to confirm that my memory was correct. Then I spun the journal to face Isa. "Read this."

"'Father is so concerned with doing the impossible and making his own life easier that he never considers how his actions affect others. I found Eloise crying today because the doll she was playing with disappeared. She had left it on the floor, and the tidying Truth father had cast moved it to a shelf she could not even reach. I had to convince father to leave off his current experiment long enough to fix the problem. Once I wondered aloud what would happen if a toy disappeared while Daniel played, Father agreed the issue was more pressing than his experiment. The threat of one of my son's tantrums is enough to make anyone act with haste.'"

Isa looked up. "If Sebastien could create his own Truths, why did he need to ask his father for help?"

Of course, she spotted the inconsistency immediately. I sank down on the desk, tucking my paws under my body. "That is the question. To answer a few more you may have: yes, Sebastien had written his own Truths by this point, and no, I don't think he cared about showing his father the unintended consequences of his actions. From what I read in his journals, Sebastien resigned himself to his father's inability to focus on practical matters while still a boy. He was the one who negotiated the letter of patent granting Valois the duchy."

"He knew he couldn't change a Truth his father created," Isa stated the conclusion I didn't want to contemplate.

I stared at the journal, then with an angry swipe of my paw, sent it back to the shelf. "I'm going to be stuck as a cat forever."

Isa's hand stretched out. For a moment, I thought she was going to touch me, but then she pulled back. "Just because Sebastien couldn't alter

one of Valois's Truths doesn't mean we can't break the curse. There are too many variables to draw such a conclusion with confidence."

"What other variables do you think might matter?"

"Well, there is still the question of how Cecily accessed node power at all. Plus, you are the primary tie-holder."

"I can't create Truths. I tried to use my node-tie to reverse the curse first thing. Nothing happened."

"That doesn't mean you can't create Truths. It only means you failed—on that attempt—to reverse the curse."

"None of my ancestors since Sebastien could create Truths."

Isa speared me with a familiar look, her eyebrow raised. "They weren't able to, or they never tried?"

"No one who left a journal mentioned even trying, but Sebastien wrote about the fact that his children couldn't create Truths."

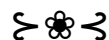
Isa held out her hand, palm up. "Show me."

I blinked. "I don't actually remember which journal it was in. Sebastien left quite a few. I only remembered the other passage because it was in the same journal that described the Truth that prepares food from a certain cookbook."

"One of Sebastien's more practical additions to his father's more whimsical spells?"

I shook my head. "Valois wrote that one, actually. Being able to eat at odd hours and not dealing with a cook mattered to him."

Isa looked over at the bookshelves lining the wall to the left of my desk. "If you don't remember which journal, then we should both start skimming them. The faster we can find that passage, the better."



"YOU ARE READING too much into a random comment." My tail lashed back and forth as I stared Isa down.

She didn't even look up from the journal in her lap. At some point while we worked, she had slipped off her shoes and curled her legs up under her on the chair. She looked at ease, a few strands of chestnut hair sliding loose from her braid, her body slouched at an angle that screamed comfort rather than propriety.

I liked seeing her that way in my home. My office. My chair.

Even when she argued with me over the most ridiculous things.

“He specifically said that Eloise saw the truth of the matter.” She looked up at me, her brows drawn together. “His daughter was a truth-reader.”

“I can say that someone saw the truth of the matter without meaning magically. She was insightful and paid more attention than her brother, that’s all.”

“Then why does Sebastien specifically mention Daniel’s lack of magic in the next sentence?”

“Fine. Let’s say you are right. What does it matter?”

“If she was a truth-reader, then the odds that she was also a truth-teller are minuscule. For Valois to have been a dual-power mage is already beyond belief. So, if I am right, neither of Sebastien’s children were truth-tellers. His father was. He was. Lady Cecily is.”

“You think that is the key to writing Truths?” Could it be that simple? “No. I know more of my ancestors were truth-tellers than just Valois and Sebastien.”

“But did they ever attempt to write a Truth?”

“Probably not,” I conceded, “but if we are working under the theory that you are right, I am also a truth-teller and I couldn’t write a Truth.”

“You couldn’t reverse the curse. That is a different problem. Did you ever attempt to write a Truth that had nothing to do with your curse?”

I hesitated, and that was all the answer Isa needed. She hummed, calling in the supplies she needed to write a Truth. Then she unrolled the scroll that had come out of the archives with her. To my surprise, she began copying the words on the scroll.

“How will it prove anything for me to make a Truth that already exists?”

“This Truth created a pen that doesn’t require an inkwell. We know the phrasing works—or at least we can assume it does—so it is a good test of your own power. You can create a new pen for me, since I can’t summon the old one thanks to it being made by magic.”

Once she finished the Truth, I signed it, and we made our way to the great hall. We only made it as far as the negotiation room before Marc interrupted us.

He entered from the other side of the room. “There you both are. I was beginning to think I was the only one who noticed the time.”

Isa and I both looked at the clock hanging on the wall, its pendulum slowly swinging back and forth. A quarter past noon.

With a twitch of a single claw, I sent the paper in Isa's hands into the locked drawer of the desk in my private tower room. "Of course. I apologize for delaying the meal; we were caught up in a debate."

I didn't look toward the great hall as we passed the open doors, exiting the room instead on the far side, only a few doors down from the dining room. Marc had never before sought me out if I was late for a meal. I had skipped them without warning at least twice a week the entire time we had been alone together in the castle. It was the reason I had taught him how to summon his own food.

"What were you debating?" Marc asked.

This was certainly a switch in roles. Isa stayed uncharacteristically silent at my side while Marc asked questions. He normally limited his conversation with me to discussing his duties and small talk over the meals we shared.

"The relative usefulness of the various enchantments on the castle." I told Marc, realizing why Isa wasn't answering. She didn't know how much I wanted to keep secret from Marc, nor could she lie outright. I needed to shift the conversation so that she wouldn't be forced to talk around the truth. "Isa insists that the truth-telling enchantment is more harmful than not because it gives people a false sense of how honest everyone is."

Isa looked down at me and continued the conversation as if we truly had been debating just that. "You look closer at a person's motivations when you know they can lie. Those motivations don't disappear because of a truth-telling enchantment."

"But they are harder to hide." Marc held open the dining-room door.

Isa paused as she stepped past him, leveling him with a flinty look. "Meaning that people put more effort into hiding them and therefore should not be underestimated."

Seeing the look Marc gave Isa once she had her back to him, I decided not to step into this conversation. Since I had yet to master the magic needed to make the secretary answer my questions, relying on Isa's talents might be wisest. She could get the answers I needed simply by pricking his pride.

"If you are so fond of honesty," Marc said as he took his seat opposite Isa, "then tell us what you hide because of the enchantments of the castle."

She leaned forward. “You forget, I had no motivation to come to the castle. I was forced here. I am more interested in your motivations.”

“I found His Grace after the curse struck. The discovery was frightening, and I wanted to set things right.”

Isa’s expression didn’t change, yet I could see the intensity building as she listened to Marc’s answer. His explanation sounded simple to my ear, but Isa clearly heard plenty that he didn’t say. She understood his words in a way I couldn’t. But instead of following up on his answer, she looked at me.

Perhaps, if I had still been in human form, I could have silently conveyed to her my willingness to let her question Marc. She might have read the press of my lips as admission that I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to force him to answer my questions. She might have seen a raised eyebrow as permission to rely on her talents and continue the interrogation.

But a twitched whisker and slow blink clearly told her nothing.

“His Grace must have appreciated your interest in helping.”

Because I understood Isa in a way I never had understood my secretary, I could guess at what she had left unsaid. She didn’t let on that I now regretted relying on Marc. She didn’t say he had actually helped me.

I didn’t think Marc heard those unspoken caveats. He once more thought he had fooled Isa’s truth-reading. As I summoned our meal, I regretted that Isa had respected my desire not to let Marc discover I had doubts about him. Next time, I wanted her to push. He might not have to answer her, but even so, she would learn so much more than I ever could.

TWENTY-TWO

FELIX



I WATCHED Isa write in a journal, her hand gliding over paper without hesitation, and wondered if she was actually writing her thoughts or just enjoying the ease of using the Truth-made pen.

I was supposed to be practicing truth-telling, asking Isa questions when I thought I had the spell properly cast, but I could not get the power to settle around her as I had once before. Granted, I had spent more time studying the shape of her lips and trying to decide the exact color of her eyes—russet—than actually focusing on the magic. Nevertheless, the first hints of a headache had just formed behind my eyes, and I released the node power.

“Even if I could master this power in the next five minutes, I will still be rubbish at questioning Marc.”

Isa looked up from her journal. “If you master the power, it doesn’t matter if you are rubbish at questioning. You can ask him directly what he is up to and he will have to answer.”

“And he can still hide the truth from me, even then. I think you should question him instead. You figured something out this afternoon without even trying.”

“I don’t know that I’d put it quite like that. I heard something that confirmed that your suspicions are well placed, but I didn’t uncover a secret.”

“But you could have if you hadn’t stopped pushing him. I know you did it because I didn’t want him to know I was onto him, but I think it would have been better if you had kept going. Next time, you should keep going.”

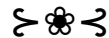
“I can only push so far without him realizing it is an interrogation.” She shrugged. “He’ll stop answering at that point, and there will be

nothing I can do about it.”

“I understand. I still think you should do it. You are better at this than me.”

Isa looked away, and a faint hint of pink dusted her cheeks.

“I’ll try to truth-tell him,” I continued, wondering why such a straightforward statement—I wouldn’t have even considered it a compliment, just a fact—made her blush. “But either way, I want you to do the questioning.”



WE WAITED ANOTHER day and a half. Isa wanted to catch Marc as off-guard as possible and hoped I might master my magic. I still could do no more than the enchantment on the castle already did, but I decided it was time to summon Marc, anyway. The plan was to explain away Isa’s questioning as her attempt to understand what we had already discovered. She could honestly say she preferred to hear about things than read through notes in a journal.

Marc narrowed his eyes when he saw Isa in my office, sitting behind my desk, then he smiled and focused on me as if nothing was amiss. “You wanted to see me, Your Grace?”

I tilted my head toward the empty chair in front of my desk before settling down so that Isa had an unobstructed view of the secretary. “Please sit. Miss Cardh has some questions she wanted to ask us about the research we conducted before her arrival.”

Marc shifted his smile to Isa. “Was the journal I provided not enough?”

Isa didn’t bother with a polite smile. “I want to make sure I understand everything.”

“What questions do you have?”

Isa looked down at the journal splayed open in front of her. She had written out several questions the day before, going over what she hoped to learn with me. She explained that she would adapt as she heard Marc’s answers but wanted to have a few things prepared. Writing certain questions out ahead of time would also help as she noted Marc’s answers. Apparently she had a shorthand she used to record what she heard with her magic, but sometimes recording everything interrupted the flow of questioning too much.

“You found His Grace in the great hall after Lady Cecily cursed him, correct?”

I listened to the questions and answers, but most of my attention was on the power I drew from the node and my attempt to force Marc to answer.

“Correct. The butler and I helped Duke Felix hide his transformation from the rest of the staff. What does this have to do with our research?”

The magic hadn’t infused the air around Marc. He didn’t have to answer. But I had been right; he was too proud to avoid answering Isa’s questions. I only hoped she could keep him from discovering this was an interrogation until after we had answers.

I shouldn’t have worried. She knew exactly how to make Marc dance to her tune.

“Your notes mentioned the fact that Lady Cecily was not around when His Grace was discovered, nor was there any sign of the paper she had used to curse him. You didn’t say how you recognized His Grace.”

“I didn’t know the cat was Duke Felix until he spoke.”

Isa wrote out his answer, adding a series of dots and dashes above and below the words. “His Grace has you hunting the archives for scrolls with only one signature. How have you structured your search?”

“We do not know how the archives are organized, so I have had to rely more on luck than anything else.”

Her pen didn’t stop moving, but Isa’s gaze transferred to me. “How many of the Truths listed in your notes did you know about before starting your research, Your Grace?”

Isa had warned me that she would ask me questions, too, but it still took me off guard. I had expected her to switch to questioning me if Marc seemed antsy, but her style seemed to thrive on confusing everyone around her.

“Perhaps a little over half of them?”

Her pen still moved, and I wondered why. She couldn’t read me. She gave me the same look as on the first morning she had questioned me.

“Could you be more specific?”

“Not really. I don’t remember the exact number of Truths I documented. I suppose I discovered five or six by reading my ancestor’s journals.”

“Marc, when did you start working at Rose Castle?”

Instead of answering, Marc raised a brow in my direction. “Are all these questions really necessary, Your Grace? I’m not sure I see the relevance.”

“I’m not sure I do either,” I drawled, “but Miss Cardh has a fondness for asking about everything. The sooner we answer, the sooner we can both return to our own research.”

Isa glared at me, and I could not tell if it was an act or if she thought I meant my words and she was truly angry. “You’re the one who made it so that I am required to do everything in my power to break the curse. I can’t break the curse if I don’t understand anything going on in this castle.” Her attention shifted to Marc. “For your information, the question is relevant because it tells me how familiar you are with the archives. So, I’ll ask again. How long have you worked at Rose Castle?”

“Two years.”

“You found more than one scroll with an heir’s contract. Where were they located in the archives in relation to each other?”

For a half-hour, the questions kept coming. Isa jumped from topic to topic, throwing questions at both of us in a barrage that didn’t leave room for thought. She’d ask Marc one thing, then five questions later, follow up on his answer after seeming to have dismissed it. The secretary was clearly annoyed, but he didn’t appear to be on guard or nervous.

I wondered what Isa had learned, for the answers I heard told me nothing useful. I gave up trying to truth-tell Marc, letting the power slip away.

Then Isa slipped in a question that I almost ignored, it sounded like so many of her earlier, seemingly pointless questions.

“How many scrolls with only one signature have you seen?”

“Five.”

My head snapped up from where I had rested it on my front paws. At the same instant, Marc realized what he had said. He had seen five contracts with a single signature but only shown me two.

I didn’t have to think about it. Magic poured out of me, supplemented by the node, and washed over Marc in a tidal wave of power only I could see. I stood up. “Where are the scrolls you didn’t show me?”

He fought the need to speak, but the magic pressed on him. Finally, through gritted teeth, he answered. “The archives.”

I pulled on the node's power, pouring more magic into my truth-telling. "Show me where."

The magic broke, snapping back into me and through me into the node. The backlash sent me reeling, and only Isa's quick reflexes kept me from tumbling off the desk to the floor.

She caught me in her arms, cradling my body against her chest. In that moment, the pain was worth it. The next, it was nothing compared to the fear that this might be as close as I'd ever come to wrapping her in my arms.

Holding a cat meant nothing to her. She might have prevented me from falling, but her focus was still on the secretary. "Where in the archives, Marc?"

My thoughts cleared a little more, and I revised my assessment. Isa wasn't focused on the secretary; she was focused on breaking the curse. She was asking the question I should have while I had Marc in my power. But I had given an order instead of asking a question, breaking the magic's hold. And now, I didn't think I'd be able to call up any power for the rest of the day at least. My head pounded, and just the thought of trying to look at magic was enough to make me dizzy.

Marc tilted his chin into the air. "I don't have to tell you. I don't have to tell either of you. And I won't."

I lifted my head from Isa's arm. "And I don't have to give you free run of my home or allow you access to the archives. Until you are ready to tell me about the other contracts you found, you will be confined to your room."

The secretary sneered. "I'm not a child to be punished. Don't forget, you need me more than I need you. Who will go to Leort if I am locked up? Isa can't under the terms of her contract."

Though part of me wanted to remain in Isa's arms, I extracted myself, stepping back onto the desk. "You just made a trip. Another won't be needed for more than a week at least. And Berklay will find a way to get a message to me if you don't show up for your next scheduled meeting."

"Then I guess we'll see who lasts the longest."

Marc stood up, and Isa mirrored his movement. There was an unsettling tension running through her where she stood behind me, as though she was on the verge of flight, holding the motion back through

sheer willpower. It distracted me enough that I didn't respond to Marc before he walked out of my office.

"Quick." Isa scooped me into her arms once more. "What room do you want him locked up in? He's going to make a run for it, so we need to summon him to a room now if you don't want him to leave the castle."

I didn't bother to ask how she knew, or insist that I could walk on my own. "Third floor. We'll use his bedroom." I consulted my sense of the castle, then braved the pain of looking at the magic around me so I could pluck a single strand. "He's going to the front door."

Isa ran. "Can we still summon him once he is out of the castle?"

"So long as he is on the hillside. But I locked the front door. We have a little time."

She didn't slow, though her breath came out in gasps by the time she reached the third floor. "Two. Flights. Of stairs. Shouldn't. Leave me. This. Winded."

"You sprinted up them while carrying a duke. I think you're doing fine. Fourth door on the left."

Isa jogged down the hall to the room, set me on the floor, and stepped inside. I heard her hum as she triggered the summoning spell that allowed a living creature to be pulled through the castle to the summoner's location. A pity the spell didn't allow moving people around with the same freedom as furniture. Isa wouldn't have needed to run up all the stairs, then.

Marc materialized in the middle of the room.

While he bent over, his reaction to the spell similar to Isa's, she leapt back into the hall and slammed the door shut. I managed to lock the door before my vision went fuzzy. Then black.

TWENTY-THREE

ISABEL



I CARRIED THE unconscious duke to the spire room above the library. There I settled on the chaise, his body a warm weight on my lap. I could have set him on the cushion next to me, or even the chair across the room, but that felt callous. I wanted him to know he wasn't alone the instant he woke.

He would be dealing with so many disappointments, the least I could do was make him comfortable.

I called in the journal with my notes from interviewing Marc and read over his answers. I recalled how he had shaded the truth with each word. My left hand absently stroked soft fur. Felix would not be happy when he heard my report. Marc's deceptions had begun well before Lady Cecily cursed the duke.

I still had more theories than straight answers, but I felt confident I had pieced together something close to the truth. Marc knew how Cecily had gained her node-tie. And though he hadn't expected to find Felix cursed into the form of a cat, he must have known when Cecily planned to act. He had likely told her how to create a Truth. The answer to how she had used the node would be in one of the scrolls Marc had never shown Felix, I was sure of it.

We needed to see those scrolls.

Felix stirred in my lap, his claws unsheathing and pricking me through my skirts.

"Ow," I told him mildly, lifting my hand from his back.

His head slowly came up and his claws retracted. "Isa?"

"Who else?"

"Given that I'm not one-hundred percent sure I'm not dreaming, you could be anybody."

“Backlash headaches are the stuff of nightmares.” I set my journal on the table next to me. “How are you feeling? I’d call you in a mug of willow bark tea, but I’m not sure if it is safe for cats.”

He started to stand, then winced and collapsed back against my lap. “Marc is still locked up.”

“Did you just use magic to check on him? If you keep using power, it will take you longer to recover.”

“It was more of an instinctive response than a conscious decision to check on him. How long have I been out?”

I glanced at the clock. “Less than an hour.”

While he had been unconscious, I had mulled over my thoughts in peace, but now that he was awake, the power binding me to the contract constricted. “We need the scrolls Marc found.”

“I know. The more Truths we study, the higher our chances of reversing the curse.”

“I think one of the scrolls he is hiding from you explains how Lady Cecily accessed the node power. I think Marc is behind her actions.”

“He hasn’t just been hiding things from me, but he instigated the curse itself? To what end?”

“I don’t know, though I do think you ending up as a cat was not a part of the original plan. Either Cecily went off script or they didn’t understand what they were doing with the curse.” I stroked my hand through his fur, wishing the physical comfort could lessen the betrayal. I couldn’t even give Felix the courtesy of letting him come to terms with my pronouncement, not with the node power buzzing against my skin, demanding I act.

I sighed. “You need to make Marc sign a new contract.”

“I can’t coerce a signature. What’s to make him sign anything with terms in my favor? You heard him before; he isn’t concerned about being locked up.”

“No, but he is overconfident. If you offer him his freedom in exchange for a contract that isn’t obviously in your favor, he might take the bait.”

“Can you write a contract that gets me what I need that Marc would still sign?”

My hand stilled. “Me?”

Felix twisted enough to look up at me. “You’ve seen the contract I signed with Marc. Spotting loopholes is not my strength. You’ll do a much

better job than I.”

He spoke so matter-of-factly that I couldn’t doubt his sincerity. The duke trusted me to craft a critical contract without reservation. It was so different from what I dealt with in Leort I didn’t even know how to respond. Every day spent with Felix was a new experience, triggering unfamiliar emotions.

I grounded myself with the mundane, picking up my journal and wishing I hadn’t left my spelled pen in Felix’s office. “This will be tricky. Without knowing what Marc is hiding, it is harder to judge what will make him balk. It’s going to take time to get the contract right.”

Felix narrowed his eyes at the journal. “That’s fine. I don’t mind making Marc wait a day or two. You don’t need to rush.”

“I am contractually obligated to do what I can to break the curse during the day. Much as I’d like to relax, I need to get started, even if I am not rushing.”

“I really am sorry about that.”

“I know.” I ran my fingers through his fur one last time, then gently set him on the chaise as I stood up. I missed the warm weight of him immediately. “I’m going to use your office. You shouldn’t mess with any magic for the rest of the day, so do you want me to summon anything for you before I go?”

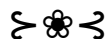
He stood up, his movements slow but steady. “I’m coming with you.”

“I thought you trusted me to write the contract myself? You should stay here and rest.”

“I do trust you. I’m not planning to look over your shoulder as you work. But I can rest just as easily in my office. Besides, that way, if I need anything, I can ask you instead of summoning it myself.”

He made that final argument with his nose in the air, the words an arrogant drawl that would have left me sputtering only a few days ago. I was learning to read the duke even without my power, though. He didn’t want to be alone but refused to admit it.

I picked him up without comment, knowing that the walk down three flights of stairs would be torture with the backlash headache plaguing him. He draped his front paws over my shoulder and purred.



“THERE ARE ENOUGH heretofores, thereins, and parties of the first part in this contract that I don’t even know what it is saying.” Felix tapped a claw against my latest draft of the contract I wanted to offer Marc.

I had spent hours yesterday and today working on it. I started with a basic exchange—Marc’s freedom for the scrolls he had found that might help Felix break the curse—then I added meaningless embellishments and tweaked the language until I had something that might fool the secretary into believing he had the upper hand.

“Are you positive it doesn’t say that I will let Marc go if he only admits to hiding scrolls from me?” Felix continued.

I pointed to a critical section. “Read this bit again, remembering that the party of the second part is Lady Cecily, not you.”

I had fooled the duke, but would Marc make the same mistake?

Felix looked from the contract to me. “You are brilliant. Let’s bring Marc in and see what he thinks.”

“I’ll summon him,” I said quickly. Felix had mostly recovered from the magical backlash that had knocked him unconscious the day before, but I wanted him to avoid using magic a little longer. He insisted he could invoke the castle’s Truths, but I had seen him wince after calling in our midday meal.

He hadn’t realized that he wasn’t on his own anymore. I could help. I wanted to help.

I hummed, matching the sound to the correct strand of power, and pulled the secretary into the office. He must have been sitting in his room, because he toppled over, completely unbalanced, when he materialized.

Neither Felix nor I said anything, waiting for him to scramble to his feet.

Once standing, Marc smoothed down his jacket—even locked in his room for over a day, he was still dressed impeccably. He ignored me and addressed Felix where he sat on the corner of the desk. “I take it you have realized you need me far more than I need you? Out of fish already and need someone to go into Leort to buy supplies? Or did your truth-reader get lost in the archives for a few hours and you realized I am the only one who has a chance of finding anything?”

“I decided it was time to offer you a deal.” Felix radiated unconcern. “You have found scrolls that I want. I will let you leave my castle in exchange for those scrolls.”

“I’m not interested in your deal.”

“You haven’t even read the terms of the agreement.”

Marc saw the contract sitting in front of me and scoffed. “You think I’ll sign a contract?”

I turned the paper around and pushed it across the desk toward him. “Read it. The duke wants to know about the scrolls. He is willing to offer you not only freedom but also immunity from prosecution in return.”

My phrasing—and Marc’s ego—were enough to convince him to look at the paper. Hopefully, he’d fall for my ruse and only see what he expected, the proof of my inadequacy. The contract was long enough that he picked it up, carrying it with him to the chair across from the desk.

He read slowly, and I had to concentrate on not fidgeting while I waited for him to finish. Felix’s tail began to twitch, and I rested my hand on his back. He stilled.

Finally, Marc returned the contract to the desk. “Change the order of the second and third sentences in the first clause, and I’ll sign it.”

I knew without looking that the change would negate everything I had tried to accomplish with the contract. My fingers tightened on Felix, and he shook his head. “No.”

“Then I won’t sign.”

“Why don’t we write a contract together?” I suggested. Felix needed Marc to sign a contract. I had to trick him into complacency. Perhaps giving him a say in how it was crafted would allow me a chance to slip something in without him scrutinizing it too closely. “We might be able to find terms that satisfy everyone.”

Marc leaned back in his chair and smiled. “I can hardly object to making the attempt. Give me a fresh sheet of paper. I’ll start with my terms.”

I pulled a sheet of paper from the desk drawer and gestured for Marc to make use of the normal pen and inkwell. He wrote quickly, not bothering with archaic contractual language to disguise his intent.

I read over his terms and began crossing bits out and adding others. It didn’t even occur to me to ask Felix for his opinion first.

The paper went back and forth until it was mostly a mess of scratched out lines with only a few words here and there left untouched. Marc didn’t bother to try to hide any favorable terms for himself, he simply rejected any terms that favored the duke. Accepting the contract back for the

seventh time, I thought about exactly which clauses he had crossed out. Then I thought about what Felix needed.

My pen hovered over the paper, an idea forming. Marc would never sign a contract that required him to hand over the scrolls he had found to Felix. He was toying with us, pretending he might eventually sign, while pushing to see if I might make a mistake. If I offered him a contract with a loophole in his favor, he'd sign it.

"This is getting hard to follow. Let me copy over the bits that neither of us has rejected." I pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and began writing. I pulled phrases from Marc's version, piecing together the mess we had made into a single, simple contract. One that had two new terms. The first was an extra guarantee for Marc's freedom to leave the castle, promising him that Felix would not use Rose Castle magic to pull him back once he departed. The second was a variation on a clause Marc had tried and I had rejected earlier.

It was a risk to only require him to divulge the location of a single scroll. I had to believe, based on his attempt to work a similar clause into the contract earlier, that he wasn't worried about the contents of all the scrolls he had found falling into Felix's hands. I had made sure that the scroll in question would be the one most likely to help us understand the curse. But if I wanted to fool Marc, asking for all the scrolls wouldn't work.

"Here." I passed the contract to the secretary. "Only one scroll, and plenty of assurances for your freedom once you collect it for His Grace. Is that good enough?"

Marc read over the terms. I knew the instant he saw the loophole I had snuck into the final sentence. He reread the last section, no doubt looking to see if I had left him a second loophole, allowing him to pull a less useful scroll in order to fulfill his end of the deal. Finally, the lure of the opening I had left overruled his caution.

"I'll sign this."

Felix walked closer to Marc and dipped a claw in the open inkwell. "Let's get this done with, then."

I think the secretary and I both held our breaths as he signed his name without taking the time to read over the contract. Marc probably felt smug that the duke was signing a flawed contract. He probably relished the idea of Felix railing at me in the aftermath.

All I could think about was how much trust Felix had just shown. He knew I couldn't work against him, but that didn't guarantee that the contract I wrote was faultless. Yet he would pass it through the node, letting the magic bind him to the terms without even looking to see what they were.

It was foolish.

It was exhilarating.

An emotion I couldn't name shivered through me. It wasn't gratitude or pleasure, though they were a part of it. It was at once complex and simple. Something to puzzle over.

But not now. Marc added his own signature to the contract, plucked it from the table, and stood. "Shall we go to the great hall and make this official?"

TWENTY-FOUR

FELIX



I LEAPT INTO the flames of the node. Turning around, I balanced my front paws on the edge of the copper bowl. “I’ll take the contract now.”

Marc held out the paper until I could grip it between my teeth. His expression bordered on gleeful, and I wondered exactly what Isa had written into the contract. I had followed enough of her exchanges with the secretary to know what terms each refused to budge on, so either she or Marc had made a mistake. Which meant Marc was in trouble, for I had no doubt that Isa had tricked him into signing something in my favor.

For someone who had only read a handful of contracts in her life, Isa was astonishingly adept at understanding the convoluted language. She also had a keen mastery of the nuances of language. She wouldn’t miss a single instance of a word changing a necessity into a mere possibility.

I stepped back into the fire. The magic flared as the node imbued the contract with power. The paper between my teeth dissolved and a deep blue swirled through the flames.

Marc twitched as the power wrapped around him. He grinned. “Time for me to fulfill my end of the bargain.”

He pivoted toward the back of the great hall and walked away. I prepared to follow him, but Isa’s hand on my back warned me not to jump out of the node.

She kept her hand there, saying nothing, until the secretary’s footsteps faded away. Then she faced me, a glitter of nervousness in her eyes. “I need you to use the node to track Marc carefully.”

The request surprised me. Isa had done everything she could since yesterday morning to keep me from using any magic at all. I closed my eyes to better sense Marc’s presence, tracking him as he moved downstairs. “He’s going to the archives.”

“He is going to pull the contract most likely to give us the information we need to understand the curse from the shelves. I suspect he will then drop it and flee. You need to be certain you know exactly which part of the archives he is in at that point, so we can retrace his steps and find the scroll.”

My eyes snapped open. “What?”

Her hand fell back to her side. “I left him a loophole. He only has to pull the scroll from the shelf, not give it to you. He wasn’t going to sign if he didn’t think he was tricking us.”

“I can summon him again. When I pulled you from the archives, a scroll came with you.”

“Because I was holding it. If you don’t summon him at the exact right time, the scroll won’t come. Also, you can’t summon him. It was in the terms for his freedom. I still can, but timing remains an issue.” Isa shrugged. “So long as you can track him, I think we are better off not letting him know that we still have a way to find the scroll.”

Marc had entered the archives by this point, so I focused back on his location. I didn’t see a map of the castle in my mind when I used this power, so I wouldn’t know exactly what row of the archives he was in, only his position in relation to the node. Still, I had learned to match that sense to exact rooms throughout the castle. I should at least be able to memorize the spot and direct Isa to it, even if her route was made difficult by the maze.

Marc stilled, and I understood why Isa didn’t want to try summoning him in order to get the scroll. There was no telling when he picked it up. He paused in one spot for long enough that he probably checked a dozen scrolls, not remembering the exact location of the one he needed. Then he moved again, and not back the way he had come. A little farther on, he paused once more.

At the end of that interlude, he retraced his path, and I focused on the last location he had stopped, imprinting it into my memory. “I think I have the spot.”

“Wonderful. Once Marc gets upstairs, we can head down to the archives. If we are lucky, it will be on the floor when we get there.”

I leapt out of the node. “And if we aren’t lucky?”

“Then we’ll still have a very limited area to scour for a useful contract. If it is a Truth scroll, I might even be able to identify it by the

sound of the magic.”

I checked my sense of Marc’s location, ignoring the building throb in my head that told me Isa had been right to advise me against using magic today. I wouldn’t let a headache deter me now. “He’s on his way to the third floor. I expected him to flee the instant he fulfilled his part of the contract.”

Isa followed Marc’s earlier path to the back of the great hall. “He no doubt thinks it is worth taking the time to pack his things. Even if he suspected that we knew he never planned to hand over the scroll, he still considers himself safe. You can’t hold him here.”

I walked at her side. “But you could still lock him in? Not that I necessarily want to. I’m just curious.”

“I could, if I knew the correct Truth to invoke.”

I spun around and flicked a strand of node power, causing the doors behind us to slide closed. “The invocation is ‘Let this door be locked to all but the correct key.’” The lock clicked into place. “And to unlock: ‘Let this door unlock as though the key was turned.’”

Isa studied the unlocked door for a long moment. “Let this door be locked to all, including its key.”

Before I could point out that she had changed the invocation, the lock clicked. Then Isa hummed and a brass key materialized in her hand. She inserted it into the lock, but it wouldn’t turn. She smiled at me.

“I hope you know how to unlock it now. I’m going to be very annoyed if I always have to use the front door to enter the great hall.”

Isa shrugged. “I’m sure we can find the correct strand of node power, eventually.”

I flicked a claw against the strand I would usually use to unlock a door. Nothing happened. I growled.

Isa laughed. “Let this door unlock and be controlled by its key.”

The key twisted as the lock opened once more. I sent it back into the drawer of my desk with a flick of power. “How did you guess the correct invocations?”

“They follow a pattern. I’ve tested several the past few days.” Isa started walking again. “I bet there are several variations on the Truths you know about that you’ve never tried because you stop at what works. Duke Valois clearly wasn’t one to stop after a single success, though.”

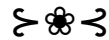
“I wish you had been around when I was a boy. I bet we could have gotten up to quite a bit of mischief together.”

Isa smirked at me. “Are you implying that you no longer get into mischief?”

“Merely conceding that you are unlikely to go along with my schemes at this point.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t go along with mine.”

“I will gladly be your accomplice,” I told her with complete honesty.



UNSURPRISINGLY, ISA’S PLAN worked perfectly. It took a few false turns and a bit of backtracking before she reached the section of the archives Marc had pulled the scroll from, but once there, she found the scroll within minutes. At least, she found a Truth scroll, signed only by Duke Valois, that we assumed was the correct one. If it didn’t have any helpful information, we’d come back and search more thoroughly.

Despite the relative ease with which we found the scroll, by the time we exited the archives, I could sense Marc making his way down the hill. I debated if I wanted to ask Isa to summon him and lock him up again before he reached the border of castle lands. The first time, my reason for not letting him leave had merit. Now that we had the scroll he had hidden from me, however, I suspected Isa might object to imprisoning him again. In all honesty, I wasn’t sure what locking him up would even accomplish. He couldn’t tell anyone about the curse—his first contract protected me from that—and what other damage could he do now that he wasn’t actively hindering my search for answers?

I let Marc go. I had made a mistake in trusting him, and dwelling on it wouldn’t help. At least that mistake had brought me Isa. Without Marc, I never would have bargained with Edwin Cardh for his younger daughter’s aid. As guilty as I still felt, I couldn’t regret signing that contract. Whether she helped me break the curse or not, meeting Isa was a boon I probably didn’t deserve.

“Let’s take this to the spire room,” Isa said, brandishing the scroll at me.

“Excellent idea, but let’s use my spire, not the one over the library.”

“Why? The library room is so comfortable.”

“Mine is better. I promise.” I led the way upstairs and through my suite. We climbed past my private study to the top level of the tower.

“You don’t have any furniture in here,” Isa exclaimed when she stepped into the room. “How is this more comfortable?”

The spire room was my escape from all duties. When I had decorated it, I hadn’t wanted a desk or even chairs in my rarely used haven. It was also the room I had taken to using when I slept since my transformation.

Cushions, pillows, and blankets covered the floor. I could throw myself down anywhere and feel like I landed on a cloud. I leapt into my favorite nest of blankets over a velvet pillow. “No judging until you try it. Sit down and then tell me that a chair is better.”

Isa lowered herself onto a cushion, her spine straight as steel. I waited, and sure enough, she slouched down, pulling a pile of pillows behind her and relaxing within a minute.

“Told you.”

“Fine, you were right. Now let’s get to work.”

Work was exactly what I had set out to ban from this room, but it was worth bringing it in now. The scroll in Isa’s lap was potentially a breakthrough that could lead to breaking the curse. Seeing her so comfortable in my domain also satisfied me on a level I didn’t want to inspect too closely.

I moved over to Isa’s side. “Let’s see it.”

She unrolled the scroll and began to read.

Aspekts of Binding

*He who doth contain the binding, in primary form, if
he giveth of hisself unto another in harte or body, by
thought, deed, or word, shall confer the inherent
aspekts as follows:*

The more Isa read, the more apparent it became that this scroll was the answer to how Lady Cecily had used node power. I barely followed the archaic language, but I knew that much. Aspekts of Binding meant a node-tie.

“Tsy save me,” I muttered when she finished reading. “People have been able to gain access to the Truthholder node without a blood-tie for hundreds of years and we didn’t know.”

“I wonder when the knowledge was lost. And how no one stumbled across it accidentally. If I’m reading this right, your mother had a node-tie because she married your father.”

“Why would Valois write this, though? He specifically says only the primary tie-holder can grant these aspekts of binding. He wasn’t married, nor did he have a lover at that point in his life from what I’ve read in Sebastien’s journals. His daughter-in-law wouldn’t have gained a node tie until after he died, when her husband became the duke. And what difference would it have made? She could invoke the Truths he created just by living in the castle.”

Isa let the scroll roll up, tapping it against her leg. “Proxies.”

I blinked at her. “Proxies?”

“In the Contract of Inheritance, it mentions that you have to assign a proxy if you plan to leave Rose Castle grounds for an extended period. Instead of a sibling or cousin, the primary tie-holder could assign the power of proxy to their spouse thanks to the aspekts of binding. I bet that was why Valois wrote it.”

“He wouldn’t have kept it a secret then. So why did the knowledge that the title-holder’s spouse would have a node tie fade away?”

Isa raised a brow. “Because this scroll doesn’t specify that a *spouse* gets the aspekts of binding. ‘Harte or body, by thought, deed, or word,’” Isa quoted. “It doesn’t take wedding vows to trigger this Truth. If everyone knew about it, then any time a random person showed signs of having a node-tie, everyone would know about their relationship with the primary tie-holder.”

“Huh.” That should have occurred to me sooner. After all, I hadn’t married Cecily, and she had gained a node-tie. “I wonder if that is the real reason the family customarily doesn’t hire maids. Not because the castle stays clean through magic, but because my ancestors couldn’t hide their affairs successfully. Or I bet there was a generation where almost every maid gained a node-tie, which would be disconcerting at the least.”

“I don’t think it ever would have been that bad.”

“You have more faith in my ancestors than I.”

“No, I read the scroll more carefully. Only one person can gain the aspekts of binding at a time. Though I suppose it would be equally disconcerting to always know who had shared the duke’s bed most recently. That would have only happened with an unmarried duke,

however. I think.” Isa unrolled the scroll once more. She scanned the page, then tapped one paragraph. “Yes, I think this means that marrying someone would trump everything else.”

I read the part she pointed out and shook my head. “I’ll take your word for it. Did you see anything that explained how to retract the aspekts of binding once given? I didn’t, but that doesn’t mean much.”

She shook her head. “No. Apart from conferring the aspekts on someone else, I saw nothing about removing them.”

“Damn.” I tried very hard not to let my mind wander the path of how I could transfer the binding from Cecily to Isa. Stuck in the form of a cat as I was, the first option felt so wrong to contemplate, even if I imagined myself as human in those fantasies. Like every other time my mind had wandered such avenues, I reminded myself to save that thought for after the curse was already broken.

The other obvious way to confer the aspekts of binding on Isa wasn’t much better. Finding someone to perform a marriage between a cat and a woman probably wasn’t impossible—especially not when the cat was also a duke—but if I let myself believe it was a step toward breaking the curse, then the contract binding Isa would force her to cooperate. I had to remind myself that Cecily had already made use of the node. I didn’t need to break her node-tie, just the curse.

I would not force Isa to do anything against her will ever again.

TWENTY-FIVE

ISABEL



I SPENT HOURS poring over the aspekts of binding scroll, looking for hidden clues about the node. Even in the lush comfort of Felix's spire room, the time had left me with a stiff neck and sore back. The scroll had answered the question of how Lady Cecily had used the node to cast her curse, but nothing more. The euphoria of having one question answered quickly faded when we realized it didn't help us break the curse.

The next morning, I decided to search the archives. Without the need to hide from Marc, I could take my time and use my magical senses to locate more Truth scrolls. As I had told Felix, Valois seemed to be the type of person to cast dozens of variations of a single spell, testing all parameters. There might be other scrolls relating to the aspekts of binding. Or a scroll that explained why Felix could create his own Truths, but not reverse Lady Cecily's, despite being the primary node-tie holder.

Finding a Truth scroll was easier said than done. I could sense the magic and know what I held without unrolling it, but I still essentially had to stumble across the scroll by accident first. Whatever system organized the scrolls was not chronological or based on signatories. I refused to believe there wasn't a system in place, though. One that had made sense to Valois. One probably outlined in one of the Truth scrolls scattered throughout the archives, if I only knew how to find the one I needed.

Whatever the system was, odds were the library was organized the same way. Noticing a pattern would be easier there.

With a burst of optimism, I left the archives and made my way to the southeast tower. An hour spent just on the first level wilted my optimism. Every time I thought I identified a pattern, the next book or shelf broke it. As I had noticed on my first time through the library, the books were grouped by genre at first glance, but not fully.

I stepped back from the shelves, looking over them from the center of the room by the staircase and mulling over what I had seen. Histories, biographies, cookbooks, treatises, and the occasional novel. If I recalled correctly, I had found a similar range of books on the third floor during my initial inspection. A similar range but not the same balance between genres.

I made my way up the stairs, wanting to confirm. Looking over the first shelf, I knew my memory was accurate. Up here, novels filled the majority of the space, but there was still a history book tucked here and a biography there. I spotted a history of Gostet between a volume of poetry and a playscript and pulled it from the shelf. I had seen a similar book down on the first level.

Book in hand, I made my way back downstairs and hunted for the tome I remembered. Once I found it, I carried both books to the spire room. By that point, I would have preferred to collapse on the floor and compare them without climbing three flights of stairs, but I was afraid the castle would whisk the books back to their shelves before I finished.

I placed both books on the table next to the chaise and opened them. I didn't know what I was looking for. The books had different authors and had been written nearly a century apart. I already knew those differences didn't explain how they were sorted. I turned pages, skimming, wondering what I thought I'd find.

"Are you planning to eat?"

I yelped, Felix's question catching me completely off-guard. My eyes were gritty, like I had forgotten to blink as I tried to take in every word in the books in front of me. I looked at them, seeing the books instead of the words. I had flipped through about a third of the pages in one book, half in the other. Nothing had triggered any recognition in me.

Felix hopped onto the table. "What has you so engrossed?"

He looked down, reading, and scoffed. "Did you find this drivel in my library? I doubt you could even read it aloud on castle grounds; it is so wrong."

I blinked. Then blinked again. "What about the other book?"

Felix shifted and read from the volume that I had only made it a third of the way through. "This one looks fine."

"That's it," I gasped. I hadn't read carefully enough. The books were structured differently, so the discrepancies hadn't jumped out at me. The

few I had noticed I had attributed to the authors' biases. But if one history was fundamentally false, and the other true . . .

Well, the node was locked to truth magic, wasn't it? "I can't believe I didn't think of that before."

Felix tilted his head. "What's it? Think of what?"

"I bet I can use the node to test it. Come on."

I closed both books and carried them over to the trapdoor.

Felix leapt after me. "Are you going to explain anything?"

"When we get to the great hall."

I paused on each level of the library, pulling a couple books from the shelves, careful to stack them based on where I had found them. Felix watched me in bemusement but refrained from asking for any more explanations.

I stopped when I stood next to the node. I didn't expect my test to take long enough that the castle would shelve the books while I worked, but I also didn't want to take the chance. Calling in the table from the spire room—an option that hadn't occurred to me while in the library—I set down my pile of books.

Then I lifted the top book—the history of Gostet Felix had disparaged—and held it to the flames.

As I had hoped, the node read the truth of the text, treating the printed author as a signatory.

I listened to the bells and whistled. "He knew what he was writing was that wrong and still published it? This book is nothing more than propaganda."

Felix swished his tail over the marble floor. "I already told you that. It still doesn't explain your comments."

"Patience." I set the false history book down and lifted the next book.

Also from the third floor of the library, that book was declared a work of fiction, though with benign intent, when I held it to the node. I went down the stack one by one and confirmed my theory. The books from the second floor were all truer than those from the third. And the ones from the first floor were the truest of all. My demonstration wasn't quite perfect, as the order of books from the same floor didn't always match the increasing levels of trueness, but how they were organized within a level was an experiment for later.

By the time I finished, I could see that Felix had figured it out. He gaped at me. “That is the answer? All this time, the library has been organized by trueness?”

“I bet it is the same system in the archives.”

“You’re probably right, but I’m not sure how that helps us.”

“If you remember what color you saw when Lady Cecily cast the curse, we can find it in the archives. Knowing the exact phrasing might help us figure out how to reverse it.”

“It can’t hurt.” Felix looked up at me with wide eyes. “But can we eat first?”

TWENTY-SIX

FELIX



ISA FINISHED HER meal quickly, rolling her eyes at me as I lingered over my plate of chicken. It wasn't until she stood up and I insisted we enjoy dessert first that I consciously understood what I was doing.

I was stalling.

Finding Cecily's curse might not give us the answers we needed to break it, but it was by far the most promising lead we had. And I didn't want to go into the archives and locate it, because if it led to a solution, Isa's time at Rose Castle would end.

If I had to choose between staying a cat and losing Isa's company, I suspected I'd choose to remain feline. Not that the ideal situation wasn't enjoying Isa's company while human once more, but I knew better than to expect such an outcome.

She didn't hate me anymore, though. At least, I was fairly certain she didn't. Perhaps if I had more time, I could get her to like me. I had moments of thinking she did, but I also knew that if the curse broke right this instant, she wouldn't hesitate to return home. I wanted that hesitation. A chance to convince her to stay of her own free will.

When Isa rubbed at her sternum, I realized I had taken too long. The node was pulling at her, insisting she fulfill the terms of her contract even as I wished she wouldn't.

I leapt from the table, now impatient to move and relieve her of that discomfort. "Let's go."

When we reached the archives, I paused. "We know the archives are arranged by trueness, but how does that help me find a particular scroll?"

"Look for the correct color. You can see the magic on the scrolls, can't you?"

I shifted my focus to that odd state where I looked beyond the physical and studied the first row of shelves. Magic glinted everywhere, the power enough to make me dizzy if I studied it for too long. I blinked away my magical sight. “I can see magic, but it doesn’t look the same as when the flames change color. In fact, I didn’t see any colors at all.”

A crease formed between Isa’s brows. “Let’s try from deeper inside the archives.”

I let her lead the way, and when we stopped, I once more looked at the magic coating the scrolls. “It is all glittery and translucent. I feel like I’m seeing textures instead of colors.”

“Damn. I was hoping it would be different for you since you actually see magic. I don’t hear the same sort of bells as I do when truth-reading here, either. Probably because the scrolls are created by node magic. That takes over. But there are still differences from one scroll’s power to the next. We need to match what we can sense with the original truth-reading.”

“Why don’t we repeat your experiment from the library? We can take a few scrolls from different rows up to the node and see what it shows us.”

“Good idea.” Isa consulted the map she had referenced as we wandered deeper, pulling the pen I had enchanted for her out of her pocket. She grabbed a scroll, unrolled it just enough to read the signature, and made a mark on the map. I trailed behind her as she wandered the archives, stopping occasionally to pull out a scroll and mark the map. She piled a dozen scrolls in the crook of her arm before finding us a path out of the archives.

When we reached the great hall, we discovered she shouldn’t have bothered being so thorough. Nothing happened when she held the scrolls to the flames.

“Let me try.” I jumped into the brazier and awkwardly accepted a scroll from Isa, pulling it with me into the node. Nothing.

I let go of the scroll and stuck my head out of the flames so I could see Isa clearly. “You’d think that if the node reads a book as being signed by the author, it could also read a contract created through its own power.”

“It must be the same as why you can’t summon the scrolls. The magic interferes with other spells.”

“It was a good idea, at least. Too bad we can’t find the curse this way.”

“Not necessarily. We can still map out the archives and narrow the area we need to search.”

“How?”

“Even though I don’t hear bells when I listen to the magic on the scrolls, I still get a sense of how true they are. My interpretations might not be perfect, but if we both try, we can probably get a general sense of which sections are full of the most or least truthful scrolls. If we can also cross reference our guesses with any scrolls you’ve witnessed, we ought to be able to make a fairly accurate map.”

“Even assuming we can stumble across scrolls I passed through the node, do you honestly expect me to remember what colors I saw when I witnessed them?”

“You remember what color you saw when Cecily cursed you.”

“The curse sticks in my mind a little differently than routine contracts,” I said dryly.

“Well, we can still make a rough map.”

“I defer to your expertise.”

Isa gave me a look. She probably thought I was humoring her, but she was the expert. And while I couldn’t feign enthusiasm for the project, I didn’t mind that it would require spending a few hours wandering the archives with her.

“What do you think Marc is doing now?” I asked as we trekked back downstairs.

“He’s probably halfway to Haiwella. He seems like the type to want more than a provincial life.”

“Leort isn’t a small town.”

“But it is very isolated and offers limited opportunities for social advancement.”

“What makes you think Marc cares about that?”

She gave me another look, this one a mix of pity and incredulity.

I laughed. “I’m not saying I don’t agree, but I want to hear your reasoning.”

“Why?”

“Because the way your mind works fascinates me.”

“I’m not sure if that is supposed to be a compliment or not.”

“Take it how you will; it is the truth.”

She smiled. “Fine, I’ll tell you my impression of Marc if you, in turn, tell me what you saw in Lady Cecily.”

“You are making an assumption there.”

“It was just her physical appeal, then? There had to have been some reason for you to sleep with her.”

I sighed. “The physical was in her favor, but mostly it was because she was a temporary visitor. Sleeping with a member of my staff is asking for trouble, and very few unattached and interested women make their way through my doors. You read the heir’s contract; I can’t just leave the castle on a whim, either.”

“You could visit Leort without needing a proxy. A night in town is doable.”

“Yes, if there was anyone in town I wanted to spend that night with.” Perhaps, if we broke the curse, I would have that chance. Even if Isa slammed the door in my face before I got three words out, that would still be two words she would hear. Eventually, I might finish an entire sentence. Though, knowing Isa, she wouldn’t wait for me to even open my mouth if she didn’t want to hear what I had to say.

“Let’s start mapping,” Isa said abruptly. “What do you see in the first row?”

TWENTY-SEVEN

ISABEL



MAPPING THE ARCHIVES was a slow, painful business. It didn't help that Felix had turned remarkably chatty. Conversations with the duke had always been too easy, but arguing over magical theory wasn't the same as discussing our childhoods. Or perhaps the problem was that I had given into my curiosity and asked him about Lady Cecily. Hearing him agree that he could visit a lover in Leort if he wanted had affected me more than I expected.

Especially since I was the one who suggested it in the first place. I think I had expected him to tell me he could visit an inn and find a bedmate if he needed to scratch an itch, not imply that he wanted more than that. After all, he had admitted that he had slept with Lady Cecily mostly because she was available and temporary.

The more we talked, the more his answer ate at me. I disliked imagining him with a hypothetical woman who meant more to him than a means of physical release even more than thinking about his past relationship with Cecily.

I shouldn't be thinking about him in such situations at all. Not because he was a cat—in my imagination he was still a man, memories from when I had seen him walking through town in the past suddenly clearer than they'd ever been. The striking onyx of his hair, the same shade as his current fur, the tailored doublet that emphasized the width of his shoulders and the narrowness of his hips, it all stood out in my mind with an intensity I wasn't used to. I had never once sighed over a man's smile. Now a twitch of whiskers sent my mind down avenues I'd never before explored.

The morning after we started mapping the trueness of the scrolls in the archives, I declared I needed a break. Listening to so much magic was

giving me a headache. It was true—I couldn't have said it otherwise—but it wasn't the whole truth. I needed a little time away from Felix.

I wanted to talk to my sister. I understood why people behaved the way they did from an outsider's perspective. Sofia was much better at understanding what was going on in the middle of social interactions. Maybe she could explain my own feelings to me, because if what I was beginning to suspect was true, I was a fool. Forgiving the duke was one thing. Liking him could even be explained away as a side-effect of living in an enchanted castle with him. But I suspected there was more than that going on.

It was a situation I was unfamiliar with.

Because of the power binding me to my contract, I couldn't spend the rest of the morning analyzing my own feelings. I still had work to do. A curse to break. A duke to turn back into a human.

My thoughts wandered again. This time, my imagination conjured more than his physical form. I heard him clearly in my mind. His deep voice and sardonic drawl. His contrary answers and teasing questions.

Node magic constricted around me and I gasped. I really needed to talk to Sofia if I was daydreaming about Felix now. She'd understand if this was caused by the forced proximity—the unintentional intimacy of working together toward a common goal.

Rubbing at my sternum, I grabbed *Theory of All Magics* from the table I had left it on days before. Now that we knew the node was locked to both truth-telling and reading, and that Cecily had gained access to the node through Felix, perhaps the book would offer me new insights.

I snorted. Or perhaps it would at least provide a distraction from my thoughts.

TWENTY-EIGHT

FELIX



ISA WAS ACTING strange. It started that morning when she complained of a headache and declared she would read more Demeret while she took a break from listening for magic. Having experienced a backlash headache after my failed attempt at truth-telling, and with a similar headache brewing after staring at the magic on the scrolls for the same amount of time as Isa, I knew that reading would not help.

Which might have explained why she opted to eat by herself, taking a true break. But then she stayed in the spire room instead of insisting we map more of the archives.

I took the hint and didn't bother her. I retreated to my private study and tried to puzzle out more secrets about the node, hoping that there was something I had overlooked in my ancestors' journals. A reference to the aspekts of binding. A hint at why Sebastien couldn't reverse his father's Truths. Anything.

I was making my way through the very sparse accounts of Daniel, Third Duke of Truthhold, when I felt the node brush against my awareness. I strummed the strand of power and sensed a stranger climbing up the hill. He wasn't anyone I had ever tracked on castle grounds before, but that was all I knew. To learn more, I'd have to rely on mundane means of observation.

I rushed out of my suite and downstairs. With a flick of my paw, I locked the front doors, then slipped out the back, locking that door behind me. A quick check showed me that Isa was still in her spire room. I considered locking her in there, the best I could manage as a warning, but she'd probably spell open the lock and rush out rather than see it as a request for her to stay hidden.

Roses covered the area surrounding the castle. Not only the briars that blanketed the stone building, but also neatly trimmed bushes in square beds with neat stone borders. I could dart from bush to bush easily, sneaking up on my quarry without him noticing. Marc wouldn't have been able to tell anyone about the curse, but he still could have given anyone he sent instructions on how to react if they saw a cat.

When the trespasser came into view, however, I remembered that Marc wasn't the only person who might be interested in Rose Castle and its inhabitants. The man looked to be in his forties, with brown hair, and wearing a forest green constable's uniform. One of Isa's colleagues.

I debated unlocking the front door. If this was one of the men who had supported her and pushed for her to get a promotion, he was here out of worry.

I left the door locked. Talking to Isa wouldn't banish his worry. It would only cause problems as the contract kept her from answering questions fully. And this constable looked like he had questions.

I watched him approach the front doors. He pulled a sealed letter from his pocket, then hesitated. After a few heartbeats, he shoved the letter back in his jacket pocket and tried to open the door. He didn't knock, and when neither door budged, he moved over to the closest window.

The man behaved more like a burglar than a constable.

He pressed against the window, peeking inside before trying to shove it open. Then he moved onto the next and the next. I followed him around the entire castle. He tried every window and door on the ground level, becoming increasingly red in the face. The most disturbing part was the fact that he never made a sound.

Finally, when he reached the front door again, he let out a frustrated growl. He marched down the main path to the nearest ornamental rose bush, leaned down and palmed the largest stone bordering the bed. I knew what was about to happen and almost betrayed myself by laughing.

I had forgotten about the enchantment that my visitor was about to discover. Perhaps it would stick in his mind better, since he had chosen a rock the size of his fist. I had only made the mistake of throwing a pebble at a window when I was a boy.

Standing only a few feet away, he hurled the stone at the glass. Rose Castle protected itself, sending the rock flying back the way it had come at

twice the original speed. It hit the constable in the gut and sent him sprawling. His jacket fell open, and I spotted the letter again.

I had seen enough. With a twitch of my paw, I summoned the letter from his pocket. Pulling on a second strand of power sent the man flying back to the bottom of the hill. I felt him attempt to cross back onto castle lands, but the power of the node, directed by my will, repelled him over and over.

The letter was addressed to me, not Isa, and my name was written in the familiar hand of my butler. Had Berklay sent the constable to find out what was going on? I would have expected him to use a more subtle approach—he understood how important secrecy was to me.

Flipping the letter over, I broke the seal and fought to unfold the paper. Then I read the news Marc had conveniently forgotten to deliver after his last trip to Leort.

TWENTY-NINE

ISABEL



I READ DEMERET because I needed a distraction. I knew that the node would allow me to avoid Felix if I was actively researching magical theory, but I didn't actually expect to find a way to break the curse. But that was exactly what I stumbled over shortly before suppertime.

I marked the page and made my way to the dining room, the book tucked under my arm. It wasn't the solution Felix expected, I was sure, and it depended on factors outside our control, but it was a solution. Not a step toward understanding the curse, but an honest to goodness way to transform him from cat back to human.

The dining room was empty when I arrived. I had too much energy to sit, so I placed the book on the table and paced. I stopped by the door and checked the hallway every time I reached that end of the table. Not only was I excited to share my discovery with Felix, but I also missed the duke. I had found myself wanting to share my thoughts on Demeret's writing style constantly. I wanted to hear his dry replies and scathing indictments of the book.

But the duke didn't come.

Perhaps, after I had avoided him that afternoon, he had assumed I wouldn't want to eat supper with him either?

I grabbed the book again. Food could wait. I needed to tell him what I had learned, and not because the node's magic was forcing me to act.

Where would he be? A flicker of awareness washed over me, an echo of sound coming from above me and across the castle. His spire room. I must have accidentally invoked the Truth that Felix used to monitor where people were in the castle.

I hurried upstairs. At the outer door to his suite, I paused, manners forcing me to knock, but I didn't turn away when I heard no response.

Unless he was checking my location, Felix wouldn't even know I was outside his rooms. He wouldn't have heard the knock from the spire room. And even if he wanted to be alone, I was confident he'd forgive my interruption when he heard what I had to say.

When I reached the spire room, I didn't see him, but the magic of the castle came to my aid once more. I followed that sense to a pile of cushions near the wall. His black nose was the only bit visible under a plush blanket. Though I hadn't tried to hide my arrival, he didn't even twitch.

I dropped the book and knelt next to him. "Felix? Are you all right?"

I threw back the blanket, and he blinked up at me with gold-green eyes that held a wealth of misery.

"What's wrong?"

His front paw twitched, and a creased piece of paper materialized next to my hand.

I read the letter, skimming quickly over the contents until a familiar name caught my attention. "Frederic? Berklay sent his brother to Rose Castle? What was he thinking?"

A spark of life lit in Felix's eyes. "That is the first thing you notice in that letter?"

I lowered the paper. "Berklay may be your butler, but I know Frederic. He's looked out for me ever since an investigation of my father made our paths cross. If he was suspicious about my sudden disappearance, sending him here was the worst thing Berklay could have done. I'm actually shocked he isn't still outside. I wouldn't have expected him to leave without talking to me. Even if you lied and said I wasn't here."

"I didn't talk to him. I watched him try to break into the castle, summoned the letter from his pocket, and banished him from the hilltop. He might still be at the base of the hill for all I know."

"He can't approach Rose Castle again?"

"Not until I let him."

"He is really going to be suspicious now. He's going to stir up trouble." His intentions would be good, but he'd draw attention to Truthhold, and that was the last thing Felix needed.

Felix snagged the edge of the blanket with a claw and pulled it over himself once more. His voice was muffled when he next spoke. "Did you read the entire letter?"

“I did.”

“Then you know it doesn’t matter now. Secrecy is no longer an option. Unless we break the curse within the next few days, everyone will know what happened.”

Confused, I scanned the letter once more. I still didn’t understand what had sent Felix hiding under the blankets, though. “Princess Charmina is coming to Leort to sign the contract about her inheritance conditions. How is that any different from every other contract you have witnessed in the past few months?”

He poked his head out. “Her Highness won’t end her journey in Leort. She’ll come to Rose Castle. Berklay won’t be able to stop her. She’ll see me as a cat.”

Never had I heard this level of despondence in Felix. He usually gave the impression of being comfortable in his feline form. I knew he wanted to break the curse, but he had always been ready to poke fun at himself.

I ran my hand over the soft fur of his head. “Is it truly so terrible? You hid what had happened because you feared the blood-lock on the node had broken. But now that we know how Cecily accessed the power, there isn’t a danger of triggering another round of node wars. More people knowing what happened could also mean knowledgeable mages working to break the curse.”

“I’d still rather not be known as Duke Feline.”

I frowned. He was lying. The ignominy of the nickname might bother him, but it wasn’t his true worry. But I couldn’t guess what was. The princess’s visit took the choice out of his hands, forcing him to reveal what had happened on a schedule not of his choosing, but if it resulted in breaking the curse, wouldn’t that be worth it?

I shifted, and the corner of *Theory of All Magics* bit into my thigh. I grinned and swiped the book off the floor. Felix might not need other mages. “Maybe you won’t be a cat by the time Her Highness arrives.”

“What?”

I flipped open to the page I had marked. “I found something. A way to transform you back into a human, I think.”

“What?” Felix repeated, throwing off the blankets with a violent shake of his entire body. “Why didn’t you say that first thing? What are we waiting for? Let’s go to the node.”

I pressed my hand against his back, stopping him from darting out of the room. “It’s not that simple, of course. We need a different node, first of all.”

Felix sank back on his haunches. “Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

I turned the book to face him. “I was reading Demeret this afternoon, and he went off on a tangent talking about how the various mage powers received their names. At first, I thought the entire section was a waste; what does it matter what each type of magic is called? But then Demeret pointed out that there is only one power that you can remove the descriptor of the power family, and the magic is still easily identifiable. How often do people say healer instead of body-healer?”

“Almost always. I’m still not seeing the point.”

“Demeret claims that emphasizing the healer aspect of that power was a deliberate push. Apparently, all the way through the Node Wars, that power went by a different name. But in the decades that followed, the mages became known as healers.”

Felix watched me for a moment, then sighed. “Fine, I’ll ask. What were the mages called before?”

“Body-changers. Demeret thinks that before the nodes were locked, body-changers had access to enough power to shapeshift.”

“You think a healer could transform me back into a human.”

“I think the healers in Drakona Forest might be able to, yes. Their node is nearly as powerful as yours.”

“We’d have to get to Drakona.”

“It isn’t that far away. If we left now, you might not make it back before Princess Charmina reaches Leort, but you won’t make her wait more than a few days. And you’ll be human when you welcome her to Rose Castle.”

“You really think the healers could . . .” Felix trailed off, and he sank back into the cushions. “No. Oh, no.”

“What? What is it?”

“It won’t reverse the curse. Even if the healers can change me back into a human, it won’t last.”

“Why not?”

“Rose Castle.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This is the heart of Truthhold. The node doesn’t just enchant things, it makes them true. The castle is covered in roses because it is Rose Castle.”

“I’m still not seeing the point,” I said, stealing Felix’s words from earlier.

“About a hundred and thirty years ago, the Duchess of Truthhold decided she didn’t want roses growing all over the castle walls. She had her gardeners rip them out. But by the next day, the rest of the plants filled in any holes made. The gardeners never made progress. So, she hired an entire crew to rip out every last rose on castle grounds in a single day. She even had them salt the ground. The next morning the roses were back, and according to family legend, in greater numbers than ever before.”

“You think Lady Cecily’s curse would cause you to transform back into a cat, even if the healers can make you human.”

“It isn’t really a curse, is it? It is a Truth. My node will work against me unless I can reverse her spell.”

“Then you won’t even try?”

He shrugged. “If there is nothing else to do, then I will certainly try. But I don’t think a quest to Drakona Forest is the right move at present. Not when Princess Charmina will be in Leort within the week. And especially not with the rumors Berklay says are circulating about you.”

I hadn’t paid much attention to that part of the letter except to recognize that the rumors made sending Frederic to Rose Castle even more foolish. I cared little what the people of Leort said about me. But they weren’t really about me, were they? People were speculating about my sudden disappearance, but it wasn’t me they were interested in. They were interested in where I had gone.

And they shouldn’t have guessed the answer so easily. “Felix, those rumors aren’t natural. Someone had to actively nurture them. My sudden absence in Leort two months after you turned hermit wouldn’t have been connected otherwise.”

“Your father might have—”

I shook my head. “The contract he signed is too stringent about what he can’t say. I doubt he’s said anything. Despite living in the same house, our lives rarely intersect. And he would say nothing to Sofia in case she figured out that he was responsible for my departure.”

“Marc,” Felix hissed. “He didn’t tell me about the princess’s scheduled arrival in Leort. He didn’t deliver the contract to your father. And the rumors started directly after his last trip into town. He’s trying to ruin you.”

“It isn’t about me,” I insisted. “The rumors aren’t about ruining my reputation, but yours. That’s why he didn’t give the second contract to my father. He wanted me to be trapped here. He wants you isolated from the townspeople.”

“I’ve been isolated for months.”

“But not ostracized. It was your decision to hide in the castle. The citizens of Leort have no idea why, but you are a duke, and dukes can choose to be eccentric. But now the narrative will be shifting. You are no longer a duke who wants privacy, but a man abusing his power to take advantage of innocent women.”

“Women, plural?”

I raised a brow. “It’s been nearly three months. People will assume I was not the first.”

He sighed. “Tsy take it. But what is Marc’s end goal?”

“I don’t know.” I tried to think like the secretary. “Berklay told him about the princess’s scheduled visit. She must factor into his plan.”

“If I weren’t a cat, I might understand,” Felix muttered. “Her Highness hears the rumors in Leort, then finds you at Rose Castle and every horrible thing whispered about me seems confirmed. But I am a cat. Once she sees that, she’ll know the situation is more complicated.”

“So, we are still missing something. There must be more to Marc’s plan than we can see.”

“But whatever it is we are missing, we don’t have much time. Not if Her Highness is a critical component. Which means we have less than a week to break the curse if we want to foil his plan.”

“We might be able to foil his plan without breaking the curse.”

“Not if we don’t even know what it is.” Felix sighed.

“I could talk to Frederic if he is still nearby. He is a talented investigator.”

“Who thinks I’ve locked you up in my castle for my own perverted purposes. What will you tell him? You can’t lie, and the contract won’t let you tell the truth. Even if I make an appearance, I doubt he’ll be reassured, since the truth is I did kidnap you.”

“I thought you saw it as more of a recruitment?”

“And you were right; it was a conscription at best.”

I reached out and ran my hand through his fur. “I’m not saying Frederic will be your biggest fan, but he can still help us. He’ll understand that you made a choice you regret and that right now it is time to deal with the consequences, not dwell on something that can’t be changed.”

“He might not be at the base of the hill anymore. I haven’t felt him try to get onto castle lands for at least an hour.”

“It can’t hurt to check. Will you go with me, or do you want to stay hidden?”

“I’ll come.”

THIRTY

FELIX



I TRUDGED AFTER Isa, feeling wrung out. My emotions had gone through so many highs and lows today I wasn't sure where I had landed. I wasn't sure of anything at the moment.

After months of hiding in my castle, searching for a way to reverse the curse and protect the node, I now had less than a week before secrecy became a thing of the past. Isa was right that secrecy wasn't as critical now that we knew how Cecily had accessed the node, but I still didn't like the idea of the whole world knowing what had happened. Either people would assume the same as I, that the blood-lock had come undone, or I'd also have to share that anyone who slept with the Duke of Truthhold could gain a tie to the node themselves.

Not to mention I had to face everyone as a cat.

I sighed. Telling Isa's constable friend would be good practice before I had to deal with the princess.

Outside, it had begun to rain. The steady drizzle didn't deter Isa. She marched outside, past the ornamental rose bushes and beyond the gravel drive that gave way to the rougher track that led toward Leort. I darted after her, hissing as the rain slicked down my fur. It should have been easy to spot the constable if he still waited at the base of the hill, but everything had been reduced to gray blurs. I made the conscious effort to allow him back on castle grounds again, but since he hadn't attempted to cross the boundary for over an hour, he wouldn't notice the change. If he was still waiting.

Trailing after Isa, I studied the wisps of power floating over the hillside. Hadn't she said there was a Truth that allowed me to control the weather? I didn't know what limits that Truth might have, or the verbal

invocation, but I could see strands of power that weren't connected to the Truths I knew. Thinking of sunny skies, I pulled on several.

The clouds didn't disappear, but the raindrops did. Isa didn't notice, her attention turned away from the castle as she started a circuit around the base of the hillside. I hurried after her and discovered she hadn't noticed because rain still fell in the area where she stood. Then our path swerved back over the artificial boundary that marked castle lands and the drops halted once more.

Isa glanced back at the sheet of rain just beyond her fingertips, then at me. "Can you extend the rain-shield a little farther?"

"No, it is following the border Duke Valois assigned." A border that didn't halt Isa's crossings. I watched her walk back into the rain, studying the area for some sign of the absent constable. "You can leave."

She stepped back into dryness and flipped a sodden strand of chestnut hair out of her eyes. "There's a magical contract that says otherwise."

"Each time you go into the rain, you are stepping off castle grounds. You aren't bound here."

"Well, no. Apart from the fact that my father had to send me to Truthhold once he reached home, nothing in the contract specifies that I am trapped here. But I still can't leave. I can cross the boundary because I'm not trying to get away from fulfilling my end of the bargain."

She wasn't actively working on breaking my curse at the moment, either. I had agreed with her about going to look for the constable, which must have made the difference. If I agreed that an action might help me in the long run, then Isa could pursue it under the terms of the contract. Perhaps I could find a way to send her home. Searching for clues in Leort wasn't that different from researching in my library or the archives. I knew that I didn't need Isa to use the node.

Isa blew out a breath. "Frederic must have headed home. Can't say as I blame him for not wanting to wait around in the rain for hours. Let's go dry off. Maybe we can figure out what Marc is up to in Leort some other way. Do you think Berklay will send another messenger soon, since you didn't respond?"

My butler might think I hadn't gotten this first message, depending on what his brother told him. A second attempt to inform me of the princess's visit was likely. But it would save everyone a lot of trouble if I could

instead make Isa returning to Leort a part of fulfilling her contract. “I have a better idea.”

“It will be a little hard to tell Berklay about your idea until after he sends the next messenger.”

“That’s why my idea is better. He won’t have to send a messenger to me, because I’ll send you to him.”

“Didn’t we just decide that even though I can cross the boundary, it doesn’t mean I can leave?”

“No. You decided that.”

Isa opened the front door of the castle and stepped inside, looking down at me. “You disagree with my conclusion?”

I stepped out of the rain and attempted to shake off the damp, but my fur was too drenched. It was going to take forever to dry off. “I don’t disagree, exactly. I think you made a valid point when you said the node didn’t think you were trying to escape the terms of your contract, and that was what allowed you over the boundary. If I can summon you to the archives with an accidental thought, I ought to be able to send you to Leort on purpose.”

Calling in a towel and rubbing at her hair, Isa scoffed. “How does my return to Leort help? Remember, my contract isn’t just about following your orders, it is about doing everything I can to break the curse. With the way you worded it, you can’t even claim that sending me to Leort to delay Princess Charmina is fulfilling my terms, because helping you maintain secrecy isn’t related to breaking the curse.”

“No, but finding out what Marc is up to is related. You are just as likely to find information I need to break the curse in Leort as at Rose Castle.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure it will work like that.” She knelt down, holding out the towel so I could dry myself. “Especially if it isn’t your main reason for sending me to Leort.”

I wiggled free of the cloth. “Who says it isn’t the reason I’m sending you?”

Isa released the towel and straightened. “My magic. You are hiding something.”

I watched her expression change as the impossibility of what she had said came over her. She had truth-read me. My node-tie should make me immune to her power. Unless she had access to even more magic than the

node itself. Like if she had her own tie to the node in addition to her innate gift.

Suddenly, her ability to truth-read me didn't seem so impossible. What had the aspekts of binding scroll said? If the primary node-tie holder gave himself to another in heart or body. By thought or action.

And my thoughts had been all about Isa. When I first read Berklay's message, I hadn't worried about the princess's arrival. I had worried that Isa's reputation was being torn to shreds back in Leort. When I finally focused on the fact that all my efforts at secrecy were about to fall apart, my first concern hadn't been that I'd soon be known as Duke Feline. No, I had lamented the fact that Isa would soon be on her way. Without Marc's interference, a second attempt to send a revised contract to her father would surely succeed, and I couldn't refuse to send that contract—no matter how much I wanted her to remain at Rose Castle.

I waited for Isa to figure it out. I worried how she would react when she realized I had conferred the aspekts of binding on her, but there was nothing I could do. I had fallen for Isa. Whether she wanted it or not, she had my heart.

But she didn't figure it out.

"How can I truth-read you? You are immune."

"No, I have the power of the node behind me." I considered leaving it at that. But Isa would figure it out, eventually. Once she got over her shock and started thinking clearly again, she'd draw the correct conclusion. Better to see her reaction now. "You have your own power plus the node's, it seems."

She gasped. "The aspekts of binding. But how did I gain a node tie? We're not married." A bubble of nervous laughter burst out of her. "We certainly haven't slept together."

My resolve faltered. If it didn't even occur to her that I might be in love with her, then I didn't want to raise the issue. I certainly didn't want to watch her make excuses and start avoiding me. "Technically, the Truth didn't say sleeping together was a way to confer the node-tie. It said something along the lines of giving your body. I've let you hold and pet me. Perhaps that is enough."

Isa frowned. "Perhaps." After a moment, she shook her head as though trying to dislodge an unpleasant thought. "I'm going upstairs to change into dry clothes. I'll meet you in your office afterward?"

“Let’s meet in my spire room, instead.”

Isa was already walking to the stairs, but she looked back long enough to nod at me. Her expression remained a fierce mix of confusion and determination.

I watched her go and wondered what she was thinking. Had she figured it out? Would she tell me if she did, or pretend she had no idea?

THIRTY-ONE

ISABEL



FELIX WAS LYING to me. Well, not lying in the strictest sense, but he was trying to misdirect me.

I couldn't pinpoint when I had started hearing the truth of Felix's words. Hearing the bells of my magic was more normal than the silence I had experienced speaking with Felix these past few weeks. I was fairly certain I had heard them before we went out into the rain to search for Frederic. But I hadn't noticed, because the magic wasn't telling me anything I didn't know. I didn't need magic to understand Felix anymore.

At least, not until he started misdirecting me about his reason for sending me back to Leort. Then he compounded his deceit while discussing how I might have gained a node-tie. Here I was, getting comfortable spending time with Felix—more comfortable than I'd ever been with anyone, my sister included—and he was looking for ways to make me leave. He wanted me out of the castle. He was uncomfortable knowing that I had a tie to his node.

In my room, I changed into dry clothes, annoyed to find that my wet outfit dried the instant I hung it up, though I remained damp. I took the time to braid my hair, knowing it would become a frizzy mess as it dried otherwise. Then I had no more excuses. I had to go face Felix again.

I climbed the stairs to his spire room with a growing sense of dread. Unless they had nothing to do with me or anyone I cared about, I didn't ignore lies. Occasionally, when I knew the intent was benign and no harm could come of it, I let a white lie slip past. But usually, I confronted people; I demanded answers. Never had I hid from the truth.

I wanted to hide now.

I didn't want to learn why Felix was so intent on sending me away. I didn't want to understand what made him so uneasy about the fact that he

had accidentally conferred a node-tie on me. I didn't want to know that while I had been developing feelings for him, he still saw me as nothing more than a means to an end.

Though he had asked me to meet him in his spire room, Felix didn't seem to be in a mood to enjoy the plush comfort of the room. He sat up straight in a rare spot of bare floor, the pillows and blankets pushed aside. His tail lashed back and forth, stilling only when he saw me enter the room.

"If I go to Leort, I can't help you experiment with the node. We still haven't determined why you can create Truths, but not reverse Lady Cecily's curse." The words poured out without conscious thought.

I didn't want to leave. I'd like to contact my sister, but I missed little else about my life in Leort. As annoyed as I had been to leave, even the risk to my job wasn't enough to tempt me back. My career as a constable felt less compelling by the day. People's lies were easy to understand and not nearly as interesting as untangling the secrets of the Truthhold Node or analyzing contracts for loopholes.

I wanted to help Felix break the curse. I wanted to be here when he transformed back into a man, and not only because that would be proof we had succeeded. But he wouldn't have a need for me once he was human.

Since staying at Rose Castle wasn't a long-term option—not if Felix wanted me gone even before we broke the curse—perhaps it was time to move on. Not just back to Leort. I could go to Haiwella, where the magistrates wouldn't hold my sex against me.

Felix tilted his head, his bright eyes seeming to look right through me. "Don't you want to return home? If I can send you to Leort, you could even bring a new copy of the contract addendum Marc never delivered to your father. You could be free."

My shoulders relaxed, and I sank onto the nearest pile of pillows. Perhaps Felix didn't want me gone. Rather, he still felt guilty. He was trying to free me. It didn't explain his misdirections when we had discovered my tie to the node, but it at least eased one worry.

It was time I returned the favor. I shook my head. "As angry as I was over how you brought me to Rose Castle, I'm not mad to be helping you break the curse. In fact, I'd be more upset if you sent me away now and I didn't get to solve the puzzle."

Felix's ear twitched. "You could still help me. Just without the weight of the contract forcing your hand."

"I appreciate the offer, but I think it is a moot point. There is no way under the terms of the contract that I can return to Leort with an addendum in hand. The magic will never see that as fulfillment of my terms."

The duke threw himself onto the nearest pillow. "Damn it. You are right. I still think you going to Leort might be worthwhile, though. We need to know what Marc might be up to."

My magic rang sharp. Either Felix still felt guilty and wasn't admitting it, or he had another reason he wanted to send me away. "What do you think I'll learn? If I confirm that Marc is in Leort—even if I confirm he is working with Lady Cecily—what does that do to help you?"

"We won't know until we figure out their plans. That's the problem. Cecily's curse was an act of revenge after I rejected her. But what does that have to do with Marc? Is he the one who told her how to use the node? Why? What did he hope to gain? Finding out might not answer how to break the curse, but it could be just as important."

"You need a spy in Leort, not me. Marc won't answer my questions, and I can't lock him up without cause."

"A spy," Felix whispered, his eyes losing focus. "A way to see what he is up to without his notice."

I waited, but he said nothing else, his gaze still locked on something beyond the spire room. "Felix?"

He blinked, then leapt to his feet. "We need to search the storage rooms for the magic mirror."

He ran out of the spire room before I could ask for clarification. I followed more slowly behind him, not wanting to trip and break my neck on the stairs.

Felix waited impatiently for me at the door of his suite, rushing out the instant I came near. He continued to rush forward, only to wait for me, over and over, until we reached the rooms on the third floor devoted to storage.

I opened the first door and stopped short. Compared to this, my sitting room was empty. Armoires, chairs, tables, even rolled-up carpets were packed together so tightly that there was no room for a person to walk inside. Every flat surface held ornaments, vases, and odds-and-ends.

While I gaped, Felix slithered through, popping back into view perched precariously atop the back of a chair halfway through the room. “Aren’t you going to help?”

“How? I can’t get through this, even if I knew what we were looking for. What are we looking for?”

“I told you, a magic mirror.” He leapt from the chair, landing somewhere out of sight with a clatter of metal against wood.

“Of course,” I muttered. “A magic mirror. How silly of me not to think that is a sufficient explanation.”

If the mirror had been created with the node’s magic, we wouldn’t be able to summon it, just like my pen. That didn’t mean I couldn’t summon every other object in the room. I began calling out each piece of furniture and all the knickknacks one by one, filling the hallway behind me. I carefully left an open path back to the stairs.

When I had cleared enough that I could stand in the center of the room, I spotted Felix again. He stood on the bed wedged into the corner of the room, his slight form dwarfed by the chests flanking him on the mattress. As I watched, the nearest chest popped open, and he rose on his hind legs to inspect the contents.

I called over the other chest to the area I had cleared and opened it. “I take it we are looking for a handheld mirror, if you think it might be in a chest?”

Felix glanced at me. “What other kind of mirror would we be looking for?”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, I don’t know, a stand mirror, or one that would hang on a wall?”

“Not very convenient to carry around that way.”

“You do realize that you didn’t tell me why we are looking for a magic mirror?”

“To spy on Marc. I completely forgot about the mirror until you mentioned spying. I’ve never seen it—let alone used it—but Duke Sebastien mentioned it in his journals.”

“Did he mention what it looked like?” I wrapped my fingers around the handle of a hand mirror at the bottom of the chest. The back was made of solid silver, embossed with intricate designs of roses, the vines trailing down and twisting together to create the handle. Once I touched it, I could sense the magic imbued into the metal and glass.

“No.”

I held up the mirror. “I think I found it.”

His eyes went distant, and I knew he was studying the magic clinging to the mirror. “Now we just need to figure out how to invoke the enchantment. I don’t remember what journal the mirror was mentioned in, so it might take a little time.”

“Or we could do this.” I concentrated on the magic in the mirror, listening for the trigger. It was easier than working with the enchantments floating all over the castle. There was only one spell on the mirror. I hummed and sent my power into the metal. I felt the magic take hold, but nothing happened.

“Do what?”

Felix’s voice echoed around me, the words coming from both the cat and the mirror.

I blinked. “What is this mirror supposed to do?”

My own voice poured out of the mirror, though Felix didn’t react. I hummed again, cutting off the enchantment.

“It allows you to look in on people from afar, but I don’t know the invocation.” Felix leapt from the bed, landing only a couple of feet from me.

“I used the enchantment,” I told him. “It made what we were saying come out of the mirror. Probably because I didn’t know to focus on someone else first. But I didn’t see anything. Let me try again.”

This time, I focused on Marc before triggering the enchantment. I heard faint rustles I couldn’t identify, but nothing else.

“Let me see.” Felix stretched up, balancing against my leg, and tried to get a look at the face of the mirror. I turned it toward him, though it showed nothing but a normal reflection. Through the enchantment, I heard a crash, then a familiar voice calling someone an idiot. Felix reared back and fell. “Where did that come from?”

“The mirror,” I said, my attention on the faint sounds once more. “Marc is in the same location as my father, it seems. Probably a tavern in Leort.”

“The mirror is supposed to show us people.”

“I invoked the enchantment, and my power manifests as sounds. Maybe if you invoke it, we’ll see something.” I stopped the enchantment once more and placed the mirror on the floor next to Felix.

He looked from the mirror to me. “How do I invoke it without knowing the trigger?”

“Look at the magic on the mirror and try to identify where it starts. Nudge that point with your own power.”

It took a few minutes, but finally Felix gasped. “That is not the sort of tavern I would expect to see Marc in.”

I could see nothing but a reflection of the ceiling in the mirror. I crouched and placed a hand gently on Felix’s back, and the image in the glass changed. When I lifted my hand, the reflection returned. Alright, then. I touched Felix once more and studied the image forming in the mirror.

He was right—the tavern was rougher than I’d expect Marc to favor. But it was exactly the sort of place my father visited. The perfect place to find cheap beer, gambling, and gossip about opportunities for those who didn’t worry about legalities.

As we watched, my father took the seat opposite Marc and began to talk. No sounds came out of the mirror. I quickly sent my power into the glass, where it mixed with Felix’s. Now we could both see and hear.

“. . . see more gold,” Edwin was saying.

“I told you, you’ll get more when the job is done. If that’s all you called me here for, then we are done.” The secretary stood up, using his height advantage to loom over Edwin. “Only send me a message if you have something worthwhile to tell me, or you won’t see any more gold.”

“Then you don’t want to hear my news?” Edwin asked in the sly tone I detested.

Marc pivoted back to the table. “Then you do have something to share?”

Edwin shrugged. “Depends.”

“Gods damn you,” Marc muttered. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a half gold piece. He held it up, shifting it higher when Edwin reached for it. “Only if your news is worthwhile.”

“I think you’ll be interested, all right. I have it on excellent authority that Constable Berklay—”

“Constable? Do you mean the butler?”

“If I had meant the butler, I’d have said the butler, wouldn’t I?” Edwin rolled his eyes. “I’m talking about his brother. The constable.”

“Fine, what about this constable?”

“Well, he went to Rose Castle today.”

Marc smiled. “The rumors have gotten that bad so soon?”

“Why else would a constable go to Truthhold?”

Marc placed the coin on the table. “Keep it up. We want everything to reach a fever pitch when the princess gets here at the end of the week.”

Felix and I watched Marc walk out of the tavern. By unspoken accord, we both ended the enchantment on the mirror, cutting off the sounds of busy Leort streets and seeing the reflection of the ceiling once more.

After a moment, Felix cleared his throat. “I thought you said your father wouldn’t spread rumors about you.”

“He wouldn’t have said anything if Marc hadn’t put him up to it. But for gold? There is little my father won’t do for the promise of easy money.”

“If the rumors about us are as bad as he said, you need to return to Leort.”

Was he concerned about my reputation or his own? It didn’t really matter. I picked up the mirror and stood. “They aren’t that bad. Father lied.”

“You could truth-read through the enchantment?”

My stomach growled, and I realized we never had eaten supper. I shook my head, walking out of the room toward the stairs. “I didn’t have to truth-read him. He’d have said whatever was necessary to make sure Marc keeps paying him. We already know that Frederic came because Berklay sent him with a letter for you.”

“No, Berklay used his brother to deliver the letter because he was going to come, no matter what.”

“But Frederic wanting to check up on me doesn’t mean the rumors are that bad. In fact, I can almost guarantee they aren’t. He wouldn’t have waited that long. He probably came the instant he heard whispers I was in Truthhold. If he has only heard that much, then the rumors are nowhere near bad enough to catch the princess’s attention.”

“But Marc is actively trying to ruin your reputation.”

I almost scoffed. Rumors about my presence in Rose Castle wouldn’t ruin my reputation. They’d worry Frederic and my other friends among the constables. They’d confuse Sofia. But for most of the citizens of the town, such rumors would make them wonder why I was the woman the duke set his sights on. Because I wasn’t the focus of the rumors. Felix was.

“Not my reputation,” I reminded Felix as we settled into our spots at the dining room table. “Yours. The fact that the gossip will make me out to be either a whore or a victim is incidental.”

“The fact that you aren’t the target doesn’t make it better!” Felix called in food with angry swipes of his paw, not paying attention to the fact that there were only two of us here to eat it. “I still want to stop Marc from spreading the rumors.”

As did I. I might not care about my reputation in town, but I didn’t like being used as a weapon against Felix. So, even though I didn’t want to leave, I would. If Marc’s plan hinged on my presence at Rose Castle, then returning to Leort was the best thing I could do to help Felix.

I sighed. “If you can convince the node to let me go home, I’ll do my best to foil his plans.”

THIRTY-TWO

FELIX



THOUGH I COULDN'T use node magic for everything, I packed the satchel for Isa's return to Leort myself. There were items I wanted to include that she might object to if she saw them going into the bag. Of course, she'd notice that there was more than the standard report confirming which contracts I had passed through the node. But if she didn't notice all the surprises I had slipped into the satchel, that was good enough for me.

In fact, I wanted her to notice one. It ought to be enough to distract her from looking too closely at the rest.

She entered my office, a cloak draped over her arm. It was still raining this morning, making me feel terrible. Her journey home would be miserable. Insisting that she summon something to keep her dry and ride my horse into town had already led to arguments. When she picked up the satchel, I suspected her refusal to accept any more help would boil over.

She started to say something, then shook her head. Squaring her shoulders, she walked up to my desk. "Do you have the messages for Berklay ready?"

I placed a paw on the satchel. "In here."

Isa grabbed the strap, pulling the bag from the table. As it swung from her fingers, she yelped. Her hand spasmed, and the bag fell to the floor with a thud.

I took a step forward, but what could I do? "Are you all right? What happened?"

She glared at the satchel, then at me. "The node. It objected to me holding the bag. What did you put in there?"

"Damn it." I leapt off the desk and fumbled the bag open. I searched for the paper I wanted and carefully pulled it out. "Can you hold it now?"

Isa hesitated, then reached down and grabbed the satchel once more. This time, when she lifted it, nothing happened. After a moment, she set it on the nearest chair and pointed at the paper under my paws. "What is that?"

"An addendum to your contract. I included instructions for Berklay to give it to Edwin. I figured that if you didn't even know you had it, the node couldn't object to you carrying it." So much for that plan. "I should update my letter to Berklay, since you clearly can't take it."

"Don't ask him to write out an addendum himself, please. I'd rather not experience that again."

I grimaced. "Was it very bad? I apologize. I really thought it wouldn't matter if you didn't know what was in the bag."

Isa looked at the satchel. "You've added much more to the bag than I expected. Should I be worried about any of the rest?"

She didn't answer whether the node's punishment had been terrible. She couldn't reassure me without lying, I supposed. I hopped onto the chair, grabbing the letter to Berklay myself. The less Isa rooted around in the bag, the better. "My other surprise is meant to help you and doesn't risk upsetting the node."

Her eyes narrowed, and I remembered that Isa could truth-read me now. How much did she pick up from what I said? I hadn't lied, but there was more than one surprise. If she found the second one while still at Rose Castle, however, she'd never agree to bring it to Leort.

Isa reached into the bag. Even before she pulled my next addition out, I could tell she knew exactly what I had added. The enchanted mirror looked right in her hand. It was ornate, but not ostentatious. Beautiful without fragility. Practical, yet elegant.

She waved it at me. "What is this?"

"A magic mirror," I drawled.

"What is it doing in the bag I'm taking to Leort?"

"You are going as my spy. It might come in handy."

"But what if you need it? You are going to be stuck in the castle by yourself."

"When I use the mirror, I see people without hearing anything. It will not do me any good."

She hesitated.

“Seriously, Isa. Take it for my sake. If it stays here, I’m going to drive myself wild. I’ll use it, then get frustrated because I can’t hear anything.”

More likely, I’d use it to get a glimpse of Isa. I had already behaved like an utter ass where she was concerned. It was better not to allow myself the temptation of spying on her as well.

Her lips pressed together. “I’ll take it on one condition.”

“What?”

“I want you to give me a report about how things are going here every evening. We can set a time when I’ll use the mirror, and you can assure me that everything is fine. Or you can talk about what experiments you have tried with the node and give me warning if you need my help. That way, it might save me the discomfort of the node tugging me back to Rose Castle unexpectedly.”

“Deal.”

I let Isa help me rewrite my letter to Berklay, which both saved time and distracted her from the satchel. As I had hoped, the mirror had been enough to keep her from looking any closer. When we finished, we made our way to the stables.

Once my mare was saddled and ready to go, Isa tried to mount. At first, I couldn’t tell if it was her lack of experience that was causing her to hesitate, but soon it became obvious there was more keeping her out of the saddle.

“The node?” I asked.

“The node,” she agreed.

“Give me a moment.” I concentrated on all the reasons it made sense for Isa to return to Leort. I willed the node to agree with me. “Try now.”

Isa tried. She couldn’t even put a foot in the stirrup.

We spent more than an hour at the stables, but Isa could not mount.

“We knew there was a chance this wouldn’t work,” she finally said.

“It will work,” I insisted. “But I can’t have any doubts. I have to know this is the best way for you to fulfill the terms of your contract. Give me the rest of the morning. If you still can’t mount after the midday meal, we’ll try again tomorrow.”

I spent the morning listing reasons Isa would do more good in Leort than Truthhold. But she still couldn’t leave.

“Why don’t we use the mirror to see what Marc is up to today?” Isa suggested as we left the stables. “It might give you a stronger reason to

send me away.”

I had no better plan. I had gone over every reason I didn’t need Isa at Rose Castle, but I couldn’t help also thinking about all the reasons I wanted her here. When we settled in my spire room with the mirror, however, I knew this plan would fail. In order for us to both see and hear through the mirror comfortably, I ended up draped over Isa’s lap. She thought nothing of it—I was merely a cat to her—but I was very aware of the intimacy of our position.

Especially when her fingers stroked through my fur, an idle gesture as we waited for Marc to actually do something.

“I suppose we were lucky yesterday, using the mirror right when Marc met with your father,” I said, trying to focus on anything other than the motion of her hand.

“We also listened in near supper time. If the bulk of his plot is centered on these rumors, he’ll be busiest in the evening.”

“True, but I was still hoping he’d go into a lengthy monologue detailing all his plans and motivations the instant we used the mirror.”

Isa looked down at me, the corner of her mouth tilting up. “You’ve been reading the novels on the third floor of the library, haven’t you?”

“Knowing how the library is organized does explain why I always found the books on the lower levels so boring. When I read a story, I want to escape reality.”

Isa’s gaze snapped back to the mirror. “Marc’s finally leaving his room.”

THIRTY-THREE

ISABEL



FELIX AND I watched Marc descend into the common room of the inn, then make his way to a private parlor. A woman waited for him inside.

“This is a waste of time,” she complained the moment Marc closed the door.

“Cecily,” Felix hissed.

I studied the woman closer. No wonder Felix had slept with her. She had golden blond hair—every strand pinned perfectly in place—a tiny waist, and delicate features. If that was what Felix was attracted to . . .

I cut the thought off. What was I doing worrying about what he found attractive?

After a pointed glare, Marc began speaking, and I gratefully focused on the conversation.

“It is not my fault,” the secretary snapped at Cecily. “If you hadn’t ruined our best chance, we wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

“He deserved to be cursed!”

“We had a plan, Cecily. If you had stuck to it, then you’d already be a duchess. Wouldn’t that have been a more fitting punishment?”

“You said I’ll still be the Duchess of Truthhold. Then you made me wait for months. When your letter arrived telling me to return to this backwoods town, I thought things were finally happening. But every day all I hear is ‘wait.’ I don’t want to wait anymore.”

“If you want this to work, then you have to do what I say this time, Cecily. And that means you wait. Her Highness will be here before the week is out.” Marc pivoted, not waiting for agreement, and stormed out of the room. He didn’t pause until he was out on the street. Then he took a deep breath and moved away from the polished central area of Leort towards a neighborhood like the one where he had met with my father.

Felix's body vibrated under my hand. "In novels, the villain monologues are more explicit."

"We still learned more than we knew before. Your curse wasn't part of the plan, Lady Cecily expects to marry you, and the princess is critical." I watched Marc walk down the streets of Leort and let my hand glide over Felix's spine. "Did this help with your determination to send me to town?"

"I am determined, but I don't think we learned anything that will make it any easier than before to convince the node. Let's see what Marc says while he is out."

We watched the mirror for hours. Felix called in simple foods we could eat without making a mess and we followed Marc from tavern to tavern until he finally retired for the night.

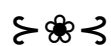
The contract binding him didn't allow Marc to mention Felix's curse or why everyone had been sent away from Rose Castle, but those were the only limits it placed on his tongue. He could lie and imply plenty. He could also tell the truth and confirm that I had gone to Truthhold. And though he was counting the days until Princess Charmina's arrival, he was patient.

"He's very good at this," I said, putting the enchanted mirror aside. "He isn't pushing too hard, making people second guess his motives, and he only says enough to get talk started, then lets everyone else speculate."

Felix growled, and for a moment he wasn't a ball of fluff in my lap, but a predator. Thankfully, I wasn't his prey. "I'm going to be fuming over the things he did say all night. By morning, it should be easy for me to send you to Leort. Your presence will put an end to these rumors."

"Ending the rumors isn't the goal of my contract," I reminded gently.

Felix leapt from my lap and stalked back and forth, his tail lashing. "The rumors are a critical component of Marc's plan. Stopping them will stymie him." He stopped and closed his eyes. His voice softened. "If you are in Leort, you can learn how Cecily plans to become my duchess. It would be hard for her to arrange a wedding if I am a cat, so transforming me back into a man must be part of the plan. I'll focus on that tonight, and hopefully by morning I'll have the node convinced."



I TRIED TO lift my foot, but it was as if my limbs had turned to lead. I shook my head at Felix and turned away from the horse. Instantly, I could move

with ease once more.

Felix's eyes narrowed. "Isa, I need you to go to Leort and discover how to break the curse from Cecily."

I didn't feel the node power around me tighten at all, but I still spun around and tried to mount. Tried, and failed.

"I don't think the node believed you," I told him. "Or maybe I really can't leave, and the fact that I can cross the boundary at the bottom of the hill means nothing, because the boundary has nothing to do with my contract."

"I'm going to figure this out." Felix insisted.

I sighed. "Then I'll listen in on Marc with the mirror for a while."

Without Felix's magic augmenting my own, I couldn't see anything in the mirror, but seeing Marc wasn't as important as hearing what he had to say. Though based on the previous day, he wouldn't do or say anything of note until evening.

It was going to be a long day.

THIRTY-FOUR

FELIX



I WASN'T SURPRISED that the node still wouldn't let Isa go. Upset, but not surprised. As much as I tried, my thoughts were all about protecting Isa's reputation, not breaking the curse. It didn't matter that she seemed genuinely unconcerned with what her neighbors said about her. And though Marc had clearly been fostering rumors that claimed I was taking advantage of Isa, it was the whispers that she was trying to sleep her way into a better life that angered me the most.

Until my thoughts centered on the curse and how Isa could break it, the node would ignore everything I tried.

After supper I declined to spy on Marc more, telling Isa I needed a little more time to think. If I couldn't send her on her way by tomorrow morning, we needed a new plan.

Pushing away thoughts of what lies Marc was spreading now, I focused on the curse. Thoughts of Isa intruded, but instead of letting myself get distracted or trying to banish them, I let my mind wander paths where Isa and the curse crossed.

If it hadn't been for the curse, I never would have signed the contract forcing Isa to come to Rose Castle. Perhaps instead, I would have bumped into her in Leort one day and our first interactions wouldn't have been tainted with a loss of free will. How would things have been different without that error in judgment hanging over us? How might things have progressed if she had gotten to know me as a man rather than a cat?

I frowned, realizing that was the wrong question to ask. With Isa, I knew my physical form wasn't a concern. It was a frustration—for me, at least—but it didn't change how she saw me. She looked deeper than that. And it was my fault that what she saw below the surface wasn't the type of man she'd fall in love with.

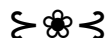
But she wasn't angry with me anymore. She might even like me. And the shift from liking to loving wasn't as great as the shift from hating to liking, was it? But it was a shift that would never happen while she was a prisoner, no matter how comfortable she had become with her cage.

My node-tie shivered.

Perhaps I had gone about dealing with the curse wrong from the very beginning. I didn't have to break it, not when I could complete it. After all, Cecily had left me a path back to my human form in her curse. I simply had to convince someone to love me.

Sending Isa home didn't guarantee she'd fall for me, but freeing her was a step in the right direction.

My thoughts coalesced into a plan. Isa's love might break the curse. She wouldn't love me while the node controlled her. Therefore, the best way for her to fulfill the terms of her contract was not to be bound to fulfill the terms.



THE NEXT MORNING, I watched Isa ride away from Rose Castle with a heavy heart. I didn't like seeing her go, but she had to leave if she was ever to come back of her own free will. The possibility of one day watching her return was worth the pain.

THIRTY-FIVE

ISABEL



THE RIDE INTO Leort was miserable. My discomfort had little to do with the rain that fell during the second half of my trip. Nor was it primarily caused by my lack of experience riding. My discomfort wasn't physical.

I didn't want to leave. When I couldn't even mount the first two days, I had wondered if it was because of my own hesitations, not Felix's. But I could do the most to help him by going to Leort and stopping whatever rumors Marc was spreading. Felix could experiment with the node without me. I had even written out dozens of ideas for him to try while I waited for Marc to say anything of note through the mirror.

When I reached Leort, I rode directly to the building where Rose Castle staff had set up shop months ago. Tying the mare to a post out front, I headed inside.

Berklay was easy to find, but hard to approach. People walked up to him in a never-ending stream, and he was constantly talking to at least three people at once. I tried to make my way across the room, but while the secretaries made way for each other, they mostly gave me confused looks. I didn't know most of these people. Many had come from other parts of Nemya in order to work at Truthhold.

I had only made it past the first row of desks when Berklay looked up and spotted me. I had met the butler before, though I knew him mostly through his brother's stories.

With a wave of his hand, he sent the people trying to get his attention scurrying away. "Miss Cardh!"

Suddenly, every eye in the room was on me. The secretaries might not know me by sight, but they recognized my name. Lovely. I ignored them and addressed Berklay, lifting the satchel at my side. "I have a delivery for you."

“Come into my office.” He gestured at the far corner of the room, where a door led deeper into the building. I made my way past the desks, my progress unhindered this time, and met him at the door. He said nothing as we walked through a narrow hall.

We passed several doors before Berklay stopped and gestured for me to precede him into a room. “I take it Frederic delivered my letter, then? He was less than forthcoming with me when he returned from Rose Castle.”

“Technically, he didn’t deliver the letter, but Felix—I mean, His Grace—received it all the same. Marc was working against him this whole time. He’s responsible for the rumors and mentioned nothing about the princess’s visit after his last trip to town.”

Berklay nodded, not looking surprised in the least. “How did you end up helping His Grace?”

I shrugged. “I’m not at liberty to discuss the details, but His Grace included a letter for you in his latest report that should explain some things.”

Berklay nodded again, and I pulled the papers from the satchel and handed them over.

I closed the satchel again, not wanting anyone to spot the mirror. “I also rode the duke’s horse into town. She’s tied up out front, if there is someone who can get her settled.”

“Of course. I’ll see to it. Are you returning to Rose Castle tomorrow?”

“No. I have a few matters to see to in town.”

“Send Frederic my way if he gives you a hard time.”

“Trying to avoid him will only make things worse,” I said ruefully. My mentor among the constables trusted me when it came to digging up answers and solving crimes, but he overcompensated for my father’s lack of parental concern in my personal life.

“True.” Berklay’s eyes moved over the letter from Felix. “I wish you luck then.”

“Thanks.”

I exited out the back of the building, following the alley until it let out at the next street. I wasn’t far from the courthouse, which made my decision on where to go next simpler. I wanted to talk to Sofia before running into anyone else, anyway. Given the reaction of the secretaries to

my name, I needed a better idea of which rumors had trickled out of the taverns and reached the general populace.

Larger than the neighboring buildings, the courthouse stood out with its brick walls. Most houses and shops in Leort had half-timber frames. I realized with a start that the courthouse no longer looked imposing to me. It was simply a brick building where hidebound old men resisted change.

Across the square from the courthouse stood the town hall, which blended into its surroundings better, apart from the clock tower. A glance at the clock made me decide to wait rather than go inside the courthouse in search of my twin. She'd come out within a quarter hour, and waiting sounded better than running into any of the magistrates when I didn't know exactly what they'd heard about me. My approach would depend on if the primary rumors were the ones disparaging me or Felix.

I made my way to a shadowy corner between two buildings and watched the doors of the courthouse. Sofia came out when I expected, but instead of turning right, she made her way left. I cursed and dashed down the street after her. I should have guessed she wouldn't be going to our home. She spent more nights with her beau than not. She had been at Leo's the morning Edwin told me that I needed to go to Rose Castle, preventing me from even telling her about my departure.

"Sofia," I hissed when I was a few paces behind her. I didn't want to attract anyone's notice but hers.

She slowed and looked behind her. "Isa!"

Well, so much for not attracting attention. My sister threw herself at me, wrapping me in a tight hug and garnering the notice of most of the other people on the street.

I hugged her back, ignoring the spectacle we made. "I'm so glad to see you."

Sofia pulled back, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "Where have you been? I've been so worried!"

I frowned. "What did Father tell you?"

A moment of confusion was followed swiftly by understanding and anger. "Father? I should have known he had something to do with it. You'd never disappear without a good reason, but he claimed not to know where you had gone. He couldn't even tell me exactly when you left."

She wouldn't have used her power on him, I knew. If Father had lied to her, then she had probably felt guilty this whole time that she hadn't been

home when I went missing. I squeezed her tighter, then stepped back. "I'll tell you all that I can, but let's get home first."

She glanced back the way she had been walking, her teeth sinking into her lip.

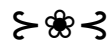
"Right," I said with a chuckle. "You weren't going home."

"I am now." She glanced back again. "But I'd like to tell Leo first."

"Of course. I'm not going to make you disappear on anyone without warning. I'll meet you back home?"

Sofia hooked her arm through mine. "Oh no, you don't. I'm not letting you out of my sight until I have explanations. You can come with me, then we'll walk home together. Leo will want to see you are safe with his own eyes, anyway. He's been worried too."

It was a measure of my sister's faith in her lover that her words registered to my magical senses as being true with only the slightest hint that they were opinions rather than fact. Not that I truly thought Leo wouldn't have a care at all about me, but his focus would have been on how my disappearance affected Sofia.



THOUGH OUR FATHER wasn't home, Sofia and I retreated to my bedroom wordlessly when we reached the townhouse. We settled across from each other on the bed, as we had so many times before. I held the satchel that still contained the enchanted mirror in my lap. Not much longer before I could listen to Felix.

Sofia shifted, tucking one leg under herself. "Well? Where have you been? The most ridiculous rumors have been circulating this week."

"Rumors that I was imprisoned by Duke Felix?"

Sofia nodded. "I'm not sure why so many people thought the story plausible, but your disappearance didn't make much sense. Frederic, in particular, has been worried."

"The story isn't as implausible as you believe." I had been planning my story for days. The non-disclosure clause of the contract would prevent me from sharing many details about the curse, but it didn't tie my tongue completely. "Father tried to steal from Rose Castle and was caught."

Sofia winced, then her expression hardened. "What does that have to do with you? I know you wouldn't have bailed him out."

“Not voluntarily. As it happened, Duke Felix needed a truth-mage. He bargained with Father, offering him freedom from prosecution in exchange for my services. Then he manipulated a loophole in the law that allowed Father to sign a contract in my name. The node magic forced me to go to Rose Castle.”

I had considered softening the story, an impulse that had surprised me, but as my sister had already pointed out, I would have let our father deal with the consequences of his actions on his own if left to my own devices. She wouldn't believe that I had opted to go to the castle in his place.

For perhaps the first time ever, I saw my sister truly mad. I recognized the look, but had previously only seen it in a mirror, not my twin. I reached out and put a hand on her knee. “It wasn't bad, I promise.”

Sofia shook her head. “No. I know you, Isa. And I know you'd lie to me if you thought it necessary. You will not convince me it wasn't bad.”

I pulled back, surprised at her vehemence. “Truth-tell me then. There are some questions I can't answer because of the contract, but you'll know that I am not lying to you.”

The air around me buzzed, my sister's magic close enough to my own that I could sense it, but not powerful enough to be more than the faintest of sounds. I waited.

“Why did you leave Leort?” My sister asked, reaching out to squeeze my hand.

“Father signed a contract requiring me to go to Rose Castle.”

“What did the duke want with you?”

“He is dealing with a magical problem and hoped a truth-mage could help him.”

“What did he make you do?”

Sofia's magic battled with the node's. There was no doubt which spell was stronger, but it left me searching for words that answered my sister's question without breaking the terms of the contract. I could have refused to answer, but the entire point of this exercise was to reassure my twin. To do that, I needed to say more, not less. “I had to help him with his problem. I researched magical theory and helped him experiment with the enchantments cast on the castle. I hunted through the archives for clues and helped him understand his power.”

“Did he make you do anything against your will?”

“Apart from making me go to Rose Castle, he never—” the words cut off, Sofia’s power preventing me from uttering the unintentional lie. I tried again. “Apart from getting me to the castle, he never purposefully made me do anything against my will.”

The buzz of Sofia’s magic disappeared. “Oh, Isa.”

“It wasn’t bad, Sofia, really. The contract was a mess, but Felix tried to fix it. And he felt terrible when he realized how much it forced me to do.”

A line formed between her brows. “But you’ve fulfilled the terms now?”

“Uh, no. That’s actually why I’m here. Berklay sent word about the rumors. The people responsible for Felix’s problem started them. We think they want to sway public opinion of him before Princess Charmina comes to sign her inheritance contract.”

“What, exactly, is the problem His Grace is dealing with?”

I was shaking my head even before she finished the question. “I can’t answer that. He had a good reason for his actions, though. He also feels horrible about it and has been doing everything he can to make up for it.”

“Isa,” my twin asked hesitantly, “do you actually like the duke?”

I hesitated.

Sofia gasped. “You do!”

“I don’t hate him,” I told her, not sure how to classify my feelings for Felix, but certain that at least that much was true. “I felt comfortable being myself around him.”

“You don’t hold back with anyone, Isa.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean I’m unaware of how I make people feel when I am blunt and refuse to hide behind polite lies. But Felix didn’t resent my harsh truths. I think he appreciated them. And . . . I enjoyed my conversations with him.”

Sofia’s eyes were round as saucers. “Are you in love with him?”

“I don’t know.” My voice trembled. “I’m no good at this sort of thing, Sofia. I’ve never been in love with someone before. How do I know if that’s what I’m feeling now?”

Her lips pressed together. “Maybe we should start with a simpler question. Are you attracted to him?”

I couldn’t explain to my twin just how complicated the situation was, or why that question was even harder to answer than her first. But I didn’t

think it was important, anyway. “What does that have to do with anything? Attraction does not equate to love.”

“Not necessarily, but we’re talking about you, Isa. As far as I’m aware, you’ve never been attracted to anyone, because you need an emotional connection first, and you’ve never had it.”

“But it wouldn’t necessarily be the same for him.” I knew it wasn’t. He’d told me straight-out that he had slept with Cecily mostly because she was there. Not because he liked her. And I didn’t know if Felix was attracted to me, and it was a ridiculous thing to even contemplate because of the curse, but it was easier to worry about that than wonder if he could fall in love with me.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, then met my sister’s gaze. “He sent me away. It took considerable effort to convince the node that my return would fulfill the terms of the contract, but he was determined. He’d have amended the contract my first week at Rose Castle if he could have. Whatever I might feel for him, he doesn’t feel the same for me. Not that I blame him. Who’d fall in love with a woman who insults him with every other breath?”

Sofia frowned at me. “Isabel Cardh, don’t you dare talk about my sister that way.”

“I’m only speaking the truth.”

“You said you were comfortable with him, that he appreciated your candidness.”

“Maybe? I don’t know, Sofia. He also didn’t have many options for conversation.”

“You fell for him, which meant you were spending time with him. He could have avoided you and didn’t.”

I didn’t debate Sofia’s conclusion that I was in love with Felix. She understood emotions better than I, and I suspected that she was correct. About my feelings, at least. “But he sent me away as soon as he could.”

“Perhaps his insistence that you return was a result of guilt?”

She said what I wanted to hear, but it was all hopeful speculation. My sister was a romantic who wanted to believe I’d find a happily ever after. She didn’t *know* what had prompted Felix’s actions. I shook my head, not disagreeing with her, but not agreeing, either. Then I noticed how much the light from the window had dimmed in the short time we had been talking.

It was almost time.

“Hold that thought; I need to check in with Felix soon.”

“Check in? How?”

“An enchanted mirror. I’ll explain how it works in a moment, but I don’t want to be late.” I reached into the satchel, but my fingers wrapped around something other than the handle of the mirror. It was hard and small, with jagged edges. As my hand swept over the bottom of the bag, I knew it wasn’t the only item of its kind.

I pulled it out, and though I never would have guessed what it was, I wasn’t surprised to be staring at an uncut emerald, so similar to the one Felix had convinced me to accept before. That stone, along with a handful of gold coins, was in my pocket.

I gripped the bottom corners of the satchel, upending it over my bed. The mirror tumbled out, along with half a dozen more emeralds and a familiar enchanted pen.

“What—” Sofia reached for the nearest stone, but I ignored her and the gems. The light was fading fast.

I picked up the mirror and hummed, nudging it with my power. I made sure that I wasn’t touching my sister, not wanting her to hear whatever Felix had to say. I wished I could have asked her to use the mirror with me, so that I could see him, but that would certainly violate the terms of my contract.

Sofia’s face was a mix of confusion and wonder as she studied the emeralds and mirror, but she cut off her questions. I was thankful that I didn’t have to shush her as Felix’s deep voice rolled over me.

“. . . one word. It’s a wonder the archives don’t fill the entire castle if Valois was as meticulous as you. Of course, if he was, he’d have included a reference catalog so that people could find things. But that is an annoyance to bemoan another day. I’m sure today you want to know the results of the experiments you left me. It’s hard without your insight to interpret the colors I saw in the node, but I think you might have been onto something with the Truth allowing dishes to be made from other cookbooks in the library. I couldn’t change the original spell, but I could add to it. I’ll have to see how that applies to the curse.

“But enough about me. How has your return been? Yes, I know you can’t actually respond, but I feel silly talking to myself. Having a conversation with a person who can’t answer is much more sensible.”

I chuckled.

“You’re laughing at me now, aren’t you? I assure you my logic is sound. I am a cat without anyone around. If I start talking to myself, I have to worry about my sanity. Talking to you is an effort to maintain my sanity. Not that I’m actually at risk of going insane! I don’t want you to worry or think I need you to return. I can handle a few days with only myself for company. After all, you survived the experience.” He sighed. “I suppose you’ve heard what you needed to hear. You’ll have other matters to occupy you this evening. Good night, Isa.”

I waited another minute, but Felix said nothing more. And why would he?

I cut off the enchantment and placed the mirror on the bed next to the gems. I picked up the pen, rolling it over my fingers.

Sofia studied my face. “You were communicating with the duke?”

Though that wasn’t quite an accurate description, since I couldn’t respond through the mirror, I nodded.

Sofia bit her lip. “You really are in love with him.” She glanced back at the bed and brandished a stone at me. “Are these emeralds?”

“I strongly suspect so.”

“He gave you a fortune in emeralds and a magic mirror.”

“The mirror is so I can check in on Felix and spy on the people who started the rumors about us. It isn’t really a means of communication, since it is one-way. I can hear Felix when I use the enchantment, but he can’t hear me. If you used the mirror, you’d be able to see whoever you focused on. I’m actually hoping you’ll help me, since with both our magics, we’ll be able to see and hear.”

Sofia cocked her head to the side. “Tell me about the emeralds, Isa.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t know they were in the bag. Perhaps I was supposed to give them to Berklay along with the documents I delivered this afternoon.”

“That is a lie if ever I heard one from you.”

“I didn’t know they were in the bag,” I protested.

“But you don’t think you were supposed to give them to Berklay. You’re the one who always said half-truths are no better than lies. Tell me why you really think they were in the bag.”

“To buy goodwill,” I admitted to Sofia. “It’s a bribe to make up for forcing a contract on me.”

Sofia shook her head. “One emerald this size might be a bribe, but half a dozen?”

“Why else would he give me a fortune in jewels?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not denying that guilt might play a role, but that isn’t all. I don’t think this is about debts. The man gave you a fortune in *jewels*.”

“The fact they are gemstones isn’t critical. It’s not like he gave me an emerald necklace. I was less likely to notice a few rocks in the bottom of the bag than a stack of gold coins. That’s all.”

Sofia lifted her hands in surrender. “Fine. You know the duke better than I.”

Her words were the truth, but my magic told me clearly how wrong my twin thought I was.

I huffed out a breath. I had other things to deal with. “Tell me about the rumors. Which ones are gaining the most traction?”

THIRTY-SIX

ISABEL



THE NEXT MORNING, I approached the constables' office where I had been stationed with a great deal of trepidation. I had been gone for nearly three weeks, but it wasn't the status of my job that made me reluctant to enter the building. Discovering I had been fired would almost be a relief at this point. I wasn't certain I could stomach working for Chief Nassan any longer.

I was ready to have my talents appreciated, not belittled. And between the wages Felix would pay me until he broke the curse and the emeralds, I could afford to walk away from a job that wasn't what I wanted.

If it weren't for Frederic, I wouldn't have even bothered returning to the office. But my mentor deserved answers, though I couldn't tell him everything. Unfortunately, even Sofia had seen through my misdirections, which meant Frederic would not be satisfied. I only hoped he didn't figure out my feelings for Felix like my twin had. He wasn't a romantic. He'd react even worse if he knew I was in love with the duke. It would be proof to him that Felix had manipulated me.

I sighed. At least my sister didn't question my feelings. As soon as she realized, she had adjusted her own view of Felix, trusting that I wouldn't fall for anyone unworthy. I wasn't sure if that was due to her optimistic nature or her trust in me, but I appreciated the support. Especially given the rumors.

According to Sofia, the most popular rumor was that Felix had abused the power of the node to force me to the castle. And though that was actually true, the townsfolk's' lurid speculations on why he would do such a thing were enough to make my blood boil. I wished the rumors that had villainized me had taken off instead. At least then the worst that could be

said about Felix was that he was too blinded by lust to recognize a mercenary social-climber when she lifted her skirts.

But Marc had twisted the truth brilliantly. Scandal was brewing, with a member of the royal family due to arrive and hear about this misuse of power within days.

I needed to convince Frederic that nothing sinister had occurred. If I couldn't get him on my side, then I had no chance of getting the rest of the populace to consider a different view of the duke.

I squared my shoulders and marched inside. The building was relatively small, not being the main headquarters for the constabulary in Leort. We had our own block of holding cells in the back, a waiting room, an interrogation room, and a large space with desks for each of the constables assigned to this section of the city. In the waiting room, Miss Lapine gaped at me, but I was through to the main room before she said anything. Only a few desks were occupied. The constables spent more time walking the streets than filling out paperwork.

Frederic, however, always spent the first hour of the morning writing his reports from the day before. He claimed it was the most efficient use of his time, since most people were too sleepy to cause problems so early. He looked up, ingrained habit making him check who had come through the door. It was such an unconscious scan that he was already looking back at the paper on his desk before he realized that seeing me was a surprise.

He threw his pen down and leapt to his feet. "Isa! You're all right. Where have you been?"

I glanced around the room. Better to satisfy curious ears now. Asking to speak to Frederic privately would only make more tongues wag. I prepared myself for the outburst certain to come. "Rose Castle."

Sure enough, every person in the room reacted. Only a handful of people, and yet a storm of outrage. Some directed at Felix, some at me. I kept my attention on Frederic, whose face was purpling with rage. I spoke softly, knowing the constables would quiet in order not to miss a word. "He hired me to help with a project."

"Don't give me that bull. I know you, Isa. You'd never have disappeared without a word if you had a choice."

I inclined my head, conceding his point. "There was an element of urgency and secrecy. Also, the initial job offer came through my father, which left me in a bit of a bind."

The constables—of course—knew plenty about my father. I felt no guilt at leading them to blame him instead of Felix for my abrupt departure. It was Edwin's fault, too, after all.

Frederic's eyes narrowed. "The duke's been holed up at his estate for going on three months now. What did he need your help for?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I already said it was a matter of secrecy. I can't discuss it."

"That's not good enough. I went out to Rose Castle a few days ago. I didn't see you or anyone there."

"That's because the duke and I were the only people at the estate. I was busy when you came, and you were gone by the time I learned of your visit."

"Are you certain? I waited for hours, but some magic knocked me from the hillside, and I couldn't get back up to the castle after that."

I was momentarily distracted. "It knocked you down the hill? You didn't just materialize there?"

The banishment Truth must have worked differently than the one used to summon people. I wondered what happened if someone was inside when they were banished from castle grounds.

Frederic looked at me like I had grown a second head. I pushed aside my speculations. "Sorry, I'm getting off topic. Yes, I am certain. I didn't learn of your visit until hours had gone by, and I checked around the entire base of the hillside for you. Of course, if you had knocked, instead of attempting to break a window, perhaps the duke would have allowed you entry to the castle."

My mentor crossed his arms. "Don't go blaming this on me. Something odd is going on in Truthhold, and I want to know what."

"I can't tell you," I repeated. "But Duke Felix is not the one to blame. He is coping with a situation not of his making to the best of his ability."

Frederic still wasn't satisfied. It didn't surprise me, but I also wasn't sure what else I could say that would satisfy him. What reassurance could I add that wouldn't raise his suspicions about my relationship with Felix?

Before I could decide, the door to the front room opened, and Miss Lapine poked her head through. "There is a messenger here for Miss Cardh. He says it is urgent."

I had no idea who would send me a message, but I appreciated the interruption all the same. Then I realized what the receptionist had called

me. *Miss Cardh*. Not *Constable Cardh*. It might have been nothing more than her repeating the title the messenger had used, but I knew it wasn't.

I signaled to Miss Lapine that I would be out in a moment, then turned back to Frederic. "Is it official, then? Not that I'm surprised, but the chief decided to fire me without waiting for an explanation?"

Frederic looked away.

"Right. I'd better see what this messenger wants then."

"Isa—"

"It's fine. Like I said, I'm not surprised."

"We can still—"

"No." I met my mentor's eyes. "You know what the oddest thing was these last few weeks? It wasn't the fact that the castle was practically deserted. It wasn't the abundance of magic. It was the fact that my skills were respected, appreciated, and praised. I'm not going to beg Chief Nassan for another chance to be dismissed constantly."

I walked away. Soon, I'd have to talk to Frederic again, but for now he could ponder what I had already told him.

In the front room, a man I didn't know—though he looked vaguely familiar—waited for me in a chair along the wall. He stood when I came through the door. "Miss Cardh. Berklay requests your presence at the Truthhold offices."

Ah. He was one of the secretaries I had seen the day before. I nodded and followed him to the door. "Do you know why he needs me?"

I hadn't expected to have anything more to do with the castle's staff after dropping off the documents from Felix. Perhaps Sofia and I were wrong, and the emeralds really had been meant for Berklay? There had been no mention of them in the note I had helped Felix revise, but he might have written others I hadn't known about.

The secretary gave me a nervous smile. "I believe he would like your assistance with Her Highness, as you have had the most recent contact with His Grace."

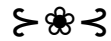
"The princess? Is she in Leort now? I thought she wasn't due to arrive for a few more days."

"As did we all, Miss Cardh."

Tsy take it! I hadn't had a chance to do anything to address the rumors yet. Nor had my spying session with Sofia the night before helped me figure out what Marc and Cecily hoped to achieve by ruining Felix's

reputation. They wanted the princess to be wary of him, at the least, but how did that help Cecily become the Duchess of Truthhold?

The only thing I knew at this point was that if she gained the title, Marc would be the one pulling her strings behind the scenes. But figuring out their plans would have to wait. I had a princess to meet.



BERKLEY MET ME in the room where I had first seen him the day before. The atmosphere was even more frenzied today, but this time everyone paid attention to me, giving me a clear path to the butler.

“Miss Cardh, thank goodness. Her Highness is waiting for you in the meeting room.”

“Why is Her Highness waiting for me?” I had never expected to meet her, hoping to disrupt the rumors before she ever arrived in Leort.

“She is not satisfied with the report I was able to give her about the status of His Grace. As you are the most recent visitor, she wishes to hear your impressions.”

My magic clanged wildly. Berkley wasn’t intentionally trying to misdirect me, he simply had a habit of speaking in a manner that reduced everything to innocuous terms. Though his duties differed from what most people would consider the role of a butler, he was still very much a butler in that regard.

The princess had likely already heard the rumors. She must have arrived in Leort the night before. A single night in town would be enough to bring the story to her ears, especially when the purpose of her visit was a trip to Rose Castle.

I swallowed. “What story did you give her?”

He must have said something more than he had told the general populace of Leort. He hadn’t told us anything, and I couldn’t imagine a princess accepting such an answer.

“I informed Her Highness that His Grace has been indisposed and without the energy to entertain visitors.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Show me to the meeting room.”

Berkley led me to a paneled door, holding it open and announcing me before stepping back and letting the door close.

I blinked at the door for a moment. Apparently, butlers didn’t do introductions like the rest of us. Then I remembered who he had

announced me to and focused my attention.

Princess Charmina Devaoile was a few years my junior, with silvery blond hair, hazel eyes, and features that straddled the line between fragile and sharp. She was standing, so I easily could tell that she was taller than me, though most people were.

I dropped into a hasty curtsey. “Your Highness.”

She nodded her head. “Miss Cardh. Please sit with me a moment.”

We took seats on opposite sides of the long table filling the room. It occurred to me only as I settled into place that the princess was alone, which surprised me. Shouldn’t she have guards hovering at her sides?

I bit my tongue and didn’t ask.

Princess Charmina smiled, and the expression wasn’t calculated. It was good-natured and friendly. “No questions?”

I cleared my throat. “I was under the impression you had questions for me, Your Highness. Did you wish for me to question you instead?”

“Well, it looked like you were wondering something.”

This was not how I had expected my interview with the princess to go, but there was no deceit in her prompts. She wasn’t setting me up, planning to ensnare me and use my words against me later. With a mental shrug, I decided to ask. I wasn’t one to overlook a chance to question anyone, even a princess. “I was wondering where your guards are.”

“Outside. While I do have a contingent of the royal guard traveling with me, they are not fastened to my side like bodyguards. There is no need for such paranoia in the heart of Nemya. Unless you know something I don’t?”

“It seems likely there are things I know that you don’t, but no threats to you. I still expected guards, though.”

“It took a few years to convince them to allow me this much freedom. But I cannot get to know the people of the kingdom if guards always stand between me and them.”

I remembered the reason Princess Charmina was here, the contract she would sign promising to uphold the cycle of consorts law. She must marry a commoner within a few years. For that reason, she had spent much more of her time around the regular citizens of Nemya than a princess normally would. If her aim had been to make her future subjects—and possible future spouse—comfortable around her, a bodyguard would have made things difficult.

I suspected she would have persevered, even with such an obstacle though. There was something artless about Her Highness. It wasn't just her age, and she wasn't naïve. Rather, she was earnest. I met her eyes. "You want to know about Duke Felix."

She nodded. "I knew Rose Castle had closed to visitors, but I was surprised to learn that His Grace had not made an exception for me. My business here does not require a negotiation or a lengthy stay. Indeed, the contract is already written out. I signed it back in Haiwella with my parents as witnesses. I need only visit the castle long enough to watch His Grace witness the contract and bind it with the power of the Truthhold node."

I could tell that no excuse would be enough to make the princess stray from her set course, but I tried anyway. Perhaps I could at least delay her a few more days. Felix had said his experiments the day before hadn't been a waste. Maybe he had discovered enough that he was transforming himself back into a human even now.

"As I'm sure Berklay informed you, His Grace is indisposed. He is capable of witnessing contracts and passing them through the node, and will gladly fulfill his duties in that regard for you, but he insists that visitors not come to the castle at present."

"And yet, you have recently been his guest, have you not?" There was speculation in the princess's remark, but not outright suspicion. Either she hadn't heard the worst of the rumors, or she knew enough about gossip to withhold judgment.

I spoke slowly, testing my words against the limitations of the contract binding me to secrecy. "I'm afraid His Grace's indisposition is the result of magic. The castle swarms with power at present. I am a truth-reader myself and have been helping the duke with experiments meant to solve the issue. For someone without truth-magic of their own, it would be uncomfortable at best currently. It would certainly be inadvisable for the heir to the throne to expose herself to such a situation."

I tried to stick as close to the truth as possible as I explained the situation. Not because I felt that bending the truth was any better than outright lying to Her Highness, but because lies were harder to track. They led to questions the liar had never considered and required a careful memory of everything said.

“Was there not a secretary at the castle, too? I do not believe he was a mage?”

I bit back a grimace. “He was not a mage, but he also had to leave shortly after I arrived.”

The princess’s eyes narrowed. “I see. Well, I did arrive ahead of schedule and wouldn’t object to spending a few days exploring the town. Hopefully, His Grace can solve the magical issue quickly. While I trust him to do his duty, I cannot in good conscience fail to witness my contract being bound by the node. I will wait until the end of the week to ride out to Rose Castle.”

Not letting out a sigh of relief taxed my control, but I managed. We still had a few days. There was still a chance Felix wouldn’t have to let the world know what had happened to him.

As it turned out, my sigh would have been premature. Felix might have been granted a few days’ grace, but I wasn’t.

“Will you do me the honor of guiding me around town today, Miss Cardh?”

THIRTY-SEVEN

FELIX



ISA HAD BEEN busy during the days after we decided she should go back to Leort before I convinced the node to allow her departure. She had written out theories for why I couldn't reverse Cecily's Truth. She had left me with dozens of spells to try. All I needed to do was sign my name at the bottom and pass them through the node.

I spent the first day she was gone testing her Truths without thinking too much about them. It was something to do instead of moping around the castle like a fool. By the second day, though, I began thinking about her theories and comparing the results of the experiments to what I had read in Sebastien's journals. That was when I had an idea of my own.

I couldn't directly reverse the curse, it seemed. Maybe, if I ever found the scroll with the exact wording in the archives, that would change, but for now, I had to work around the curse. I decided to try an alteration that wasn't a reversal to my human form.

I imagined meeting the princess while stuck as a fluffy cat. If I had to show the world I had been cursed, my ego would take it better if I could at least be a fearsome beast. I thought of Isa and the feel of her fingers running through my fur. Perhaps not too fearsome, then.

I scratched out my Truth, signed my name, and hopped into the node. The flames flared a pale indigo, and the paper dissolved. Then the pain of my original transformation washed over me again. I lost consciousness for an unknown length of time. When I came back to myself, I was still sprawled in the brazier, but I no longer fit comfortably.

I tried to puzzle out that discomfort, but my thoughts were sluggish. I lost track of time again, but eventually my mind cleared enough that I thought to lift my front leg. Still fluffy, with black fur morphing into white at the paw, but no longer small. I jumped—or rather tumbled—out of the

node and tried to find my balance. When I recovered, I discovered the plinth next to me came only to my shoulder. I looked into the flames and laughed.

This was much better. I had kept the same feline form, the same proportions, but I was now a hunting cat rather than a house cat. That I could transform at all, even if only in size, gave me hope that I could break the curse.

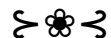
I spent the rest of the day in the archives, enjoying the ease with which I could swipe scrolls off even the highest shelves. It was still very difficult to unroll them, but I'd take what I could get. I searched almost haphazardly, alternating between looking at scrolls at random and trying to let instinct guide me to the section that held scrolls with the same level of trueness as Cecily's curse.

Isa could tell me that the colors and textures I saw were products of my mind all she wanted, but I still didn't understand what the magic told me beyond the broadest strokes. Entire rows in the archives all looked the same to me when I studied the magic. Even if I could match the textures to a color I saw when using the node, I suspected that I would never see as much nuance as she heard.

But if I could narrow my search area down to a few rows, I could look at every single scroll in that range. Once I found the curse, I'd attempt other alterations that didn't directly conflict with the wording. If I could transform into a large cat, then I wasn't trapped in one form.

I wished the mirror worked two ways. Isa would probably have plenty of ideas when she heard I had changed my size successfully.

I snorted. As if that was the reason I wanted to hear her voice.



IT TOOK MOST of a day to determine which section of the archives matched the dark violet color I had seen when Cecily cursed me. That section was still large, but not as daunting as the entire archives. The next day it took hours of pawing through scrolls to find the one I wanted. When I found it, I looked at the mess I had made of the archives—the tidying magic of the node hadn't caught up with the pace of my search—and wondered why I hadn't done this sooner.

I wouldn't have known how to narrow my search before Isa, of course, but in the months I had fumbled for a solution without making any

progress, I could have made my way through the entirety of the archives. At the very least, I should have realized that if Marc had systematically searched through the archives, he'd have found several scrolls worthy of my attention. I found a dozen Truth scrolls in just the one day. But I had trusted the contract Marc had signed and dismissed the archives from my mind.

I picked up the scroll containing Cecily's curse in my mouth, nearly forgetting that my larger teeth and stronger jaw necessitated a more delicate grip. Then again, I couldn't imagine anything so mundane as teeth—even those of a duke cursed into the form of a beast—being enough to damage a scroll created by the node.

I carried the scroll to my office, where I discovered that my change in size introduced an interesting dilemma. I was too large now to sprawl comfortably on the surface of my desk to read. Standing on the floor, however, left me craning myself around awkwardly. Climbing into the chair wasn't much better, since the only position I could take left me sitting taller than if I were human. I'd have moved to the floor if I didn't fear the node whisking the scroll away from me in a moment of inattention.

I opted for the chair and fumbled the scroll open.

I had read through the relatively short scroll down in the archives, but now I settled in to analyze it bit by bit. The hardest part was trying not to think about how much better Isa would be at the job. The last thing I wanted was for the node's power to constrict around her without warning, pulling her back to the castle against her will. I took several minutes to think about how much it mattered that she remain free, that the best way for her to help me return to human form was not to conduct magical experiments, but for me to do everything I could to make sure she didn't hate me.

My initial scan of Cecily's curse had given me a fresh burst of hope. The fact that I was still a beast didn't have to mean that Isa didn't love me—though I was realistic enough to accept that the odds were slim that she'd fall for a contrary cat who'd stolen her from her life. Nevertheless, according to the curse, there was one more step beyond falling in love. She must also admit her feelings.

After concentrating on all the reasons the node shouldn't pull Isa back as part of her contract, I tried not to dwell on that aspect of the scroll. I

had learned to love, as Cecily's curse required, but I couldn't count on Isa falling in love with me. I had to plan for the worst and search for other ways to break the curse.

Cecily had never specified the exact form I was to take, only that I would be the beast that showed my true nature and matched my heart—whatever that meant. That gave me hope that there was more room for me to adjust my form without the node considering it a reversal of her Truth. I wasn't sure exactly how, however. Apparently, a fluffy cat was the beast form the node had decided matched my essence.

I had several questions about that.

When sunset came, I began talking aloud, telling Isa about my discovery. I didn't know how long she listened every evening, but I could never stop myself from babbling. I wanted to share all the thoughts that had popped up over the course of the day, the comments I hadn't been able to direct at her. After a bit, I realized that if Isa was still listening, she'd be quite annoyed that I had told her about finding the curse without reading it to her.

I read it to her, and then, reluctantly, cut off my monologue. I bid her goodnight. A few minutes later, when she certainly would have ended the spell, I couldn't help but add, "I miss you."

THIRTY-EIGHT

ISABEL



I DIDN'T EVEN make upstairs to my bedroom before collapsing, my nerves taut as a violin string. I fell onto the sofa downstairs, thankful that my father must have already gone out to a tavern for the evening. The last thing I needed was to run into him today. So far, the only sign of him since I had returned had been the dishes in the kitchen sink.

I pressed my hand against my thigh, the shape of the enchanted mirror hidden by my skirt and petticoat. I hadn't dared leave the mirror in the townhouse while I was gone. It had been risky enough leaving the emeralds in a variety of hiding spots, so that even if my father found one, he wouldn't have them all. Now I was grateful for my paranoia, because it meant I didn't have to make my way upstairs in order to listen to Felix's report for the day.

I triggered the enchantment without bothering to unstrap the mirror from my leg.

"... absolute rubbish. I can see why that particular cookbook was located on the top shelf of the library. I will not make the mistake of summoning any other food based on those recipes."

For several minutes, Felix spoke of inconsequential nothings, and I let the words wash over me. Hearing his voice helped me banish some of the tension from escorting the princess around all day, but it couldn't make me forget that tomorrow would be worse.

"I suppose you must be listening by now, so I ought to tell you the important bits before you move on to enjoying the rest of your evening. I think tomorrow I will do as you suggested and find the section of the archives where Cecily's curse must be filed. After my success today, I want to see the original wording. You won't believe what I managed today, Isa. My form can still be altered. Well, I don't know if that is even the

correct word. I'm still in the same form, technically, I suppose. But I did manage to—"

The door to the town house burst open, and I missed the next words. My twin burst in, Leo trailing meekly behind her. "Isa! I heard you were seen all over town today with Princess Charmina. What is going on?"

I tried to focus on the words coming from the mirror, but I had missed the important bit. Felix had altered his form in some way, and it made him suspect that other alterations would be possible, so long as he didn't try to reverse the curse directly. His words slipped back into random comments and jokes, his news shared. Then he wished me a goodnight and fell silent.

I ended the enchantment and looked up at my sister. She stood bouncing on the balls of her feet. "The princess?" Sofia prompted.

"She's staying in Leort for a few days before going to Rose Castle to have the duke witness the contract about how she'll marry a commoner."

Leo went over to the chair opposite the sofa, pulling Sofia into his lap as he sat. "I think Sof wanted to know why you were escorting her more than her purpose in town."

"The one isn't wholly disconnected from the other. Since word is out that I was in Truthhold while Felix hasn't been allowing visitors, the princess was naturally curious." I didn't bother to use a title for Felix around Leo. Sofia would have already told him more or less what was going on. I sighed. "Princess Charmina hoped I would let something slip if I was around her all day. Instead, she noticed just enough of the whispers following me to become truly wary. I tried to take her to relatively unpopulated parts of the town, but she's requested that I guide her through the market district tomorrow."

She'd had an inkling of the rumors before we even met, but after observing people's reactions to me as we made our way through town, she had become far more suspicious. My attempts to ignore the whispers and shocked looks hadn't helped.

I looked at my sister. "It is almost enough to make me regret cutting my hair. If people still mistook me for you, I wouldn't have attracted as much notice."

My sister kept her hair long, so that it reached the middle of her back when left loose. Chopping mine off just above the shoulders had been a deliberate decision to differentiate us. I hated dealing with people who thought they were approaching my sister all the time.

“Maybe if you pull it back?” Sofia suggested.

I shook my head. If I pinned my hair back, then people might think I was Sofia with her hair up, but I knew such a ploy wouldn’t solve my dilemma. “No. I need to quash the rumors. The problem is that I don’t think Princess Charmina is going to be satisfied with only my word that they are lies. She will want to talk to Felix. My goal is to delay her as long as possible.”

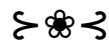
“Why?” Leo asked.

“I can’t say,” I told him with a shrug. “But a few days might make all the difference.”

Technically, Felix didn’t expect me to delay the princess. He had accepted that he’d have to tell her about the curse if she arrived before he could break the spell. But If I could help him in this way, I wanted to.

Sofia frowned. “What will you do? If Her Highness wants to visit the market district, you know people will come up and talk to you.”

I smiled, though I didn’t feel nearly as confident as I pretended. “I’ll do what I always do: make everyone else uncomfortable about how much they are lying. Perhaps it will be enough to convince Princess Charmina.”



MY PLAN WAS working. Every time the topic of my absence came up—and almost every shopkeeper and many customers mentioned it—I was able to get the gossip to admit that they had heard the rumors third- or fourth-hand and that they made no sense. That was when I’d mention that the woman at my side was the crown princess and really make them uncomfortable.

It helped that the princess dressed in clothes similar to mine today. The dress she had worn yesterday hadn’t exactly stood out, but it had still clearly been expensive. Today she wore a simple blouse, plain bodice, and wool skirt. If I hadn’t known any better—and if they weren’t too long and slender—I’d have thought they had come from my own closet.

“You are enjoying shocking people with my identity,” she accused with a slight smile that afternoon. She had stopped eyeing me with suspicion by midday. When every person who came to get sordid details out of me admitted that I would have raised hell if anyone, even a duke, had tried to coerce me, it was hard to maintain any doubts.

“I thought you were the one who liked the moment of shock, Your Highness. Why else are you dressed so simply?”

She looked out at the relatively sparse streets. We had left the market district behind, and the hour wasn't quite late enough for the rush of people heading home from work or out to the dining houses and taverns. Finally, she turned back to me. “The opposite, actually. I want to blend in. I've spent my summers among all different segments of the population, and I've found that when I don't dress like a princess, people are a little more willing to treat me like a normal human being. The point of my visits has always been so that when the time comes, I'll be comfortable around my husband. That I'll have some understanding of what his life was like.”

“But your experiences are still always flavored with the knowledge that you are royalty.”

“Exactly.”

“I apologize, Your Highness. I would gladly have hidden your identity if that was what you preferred.”

She waved my words away. “I am in Leort on official business. It isn't the time to hide my identity, though I still prefer not to flaunt it.”

“Will you travel somewhere in secret, then? I think you could pull the deception off, if you really wanted to see what life in Nemya is like without a royal title.”

“I might. I'd like to, before I must marry.” She sighed. “For today, I think it will be enough to pretend I am not myself just enough to dine somewhere other than the inn where I am staying.”

I raised a brow. “I doubt you'll find better food at any other establishments.”

The princess gave me a look. “Most expensive does not mean best, as I'm sure you are aware. I bet you know a street vendor or two who sells the most delicious food for coppers.”

“I might.”

“Lead the way then.” She stared straight ahead. “And if you forgot to call me Your Highness for the next hour or so, I wouldn't object.”

I smiled. “I can be forgetful.”

I led the princess through the streets of Leort, the traffic increasing as we went. “If you are truly looking for a surprisingly delicious meal, I have

something better than a street vendor in mind, but if you don't want to go into a tavern, there are plenty of other tasty alternatives."

"A tavern is fine. So long as there are no ladies who recognize me, I will consider the meal a success. Supper last night was an interminable affair."

I wondered if the princess was staying at the same inn as Lady Cecily. I should have spied on her instead of Marc; I knew that the princess was critical to their plot. Though if the princess was complaining about Cecily, at least it sounded like the lady hadn't won her over.

"Here we are," I announced, gesturing at the tavern.

Princess Charmina took in the window boxes full of twigs rather than flowers and the flaking paint on the door. "You are testing my resolve, aren't you?"

I grinned. "A little. But the food is worth it, I promise."

"It had better be, or I'll make you dine at the inn with me tomorrow."

Inside, the tavern looked nothing like the exterior had implied. It was clean, bright, and smelled of fresh bread and warm spices. Alec, the tavern keeper, took pride in his establishment; he simply never remembered the front door.

I led the princess to a table in the back where we'd both be able to watch the comings and goings with ease. A server came to the table in less than a minute.

"Isa," Anna greeted me with wide eyes. "You're back."

I almost groaned. I had forgotten that I would have to defend my absence yet again at the tavern. There was something in the way Anna looked at me that made me pause before answering. After all the times I had repeated this conversation today, I'd have expected my response to come without thought. But then I realized the difference between Anna's greeting and everyone else's.

She was looking at me with genuine concern. She wasn't looking for juicy gossip.

"I am," I said simply. I gestured at the princess. "My companion and I were hoping you could bring us two servings of whatever smells so delicious tonight."

Anna hesitated, her gaze flickering over Princess Charmina. She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "You're all right, then? Your father said some worrying things."

I shrugged. "You know how he is."

She studied us both for another long moment. "I suppose."

When she left, I braced myself. Sure enough, the princess didn't miss the difference between this conversation and the countless ones that had come before it. "Your father?"

Everyone else had heard the rumors through a long line of whispers. But my father frequented this tavern—how had I forgotten that? Anna would have heard whatever story he was spreading directly. I couldn't question her and make her doubt the source, though she ought to know better than to trust everything Edwin said.

I considered what answer to give, but apparently my luck had completely run out.

"Isabel! You're home safe and sound!" Edwin's voice rang through the entire tavern.

I must have missed his entrance while I spoke with Anna. I glared at my father. "I've been home for a few days, which you'd have realized if you weren't out drinking every night."

"I've been worried sick about you, my girl."

The harsh clang of his lies made me grimace. So few people lied with such bold unconcern around me. "Don't bother pretending. Your lies don't fool anyone."

His expression fell.

Damn the man. The trouble was, he was actually an excellent liar. I could practically hear the thoughts going through the princess's mind, wondering why I'd accuse my father of not caring about my welfare.

"I have been worried, Isabel. What with that contract forcing you out to Rose Castle, and no telling what the duke wanted with you. These past few weeks have been a torture of uncertainty. Especially as I know it was my fault. Can you forgive me, my girl?"

I stood up. "Forgive you? When you didn't care a whit about me, only your own hide? Everything you've done has been against my interests. Why should I ever forgive you?"

"Now Isabel, I know you are upset, but—"

"Upset? I am beyond upset. Don't pretend you made a slight error in judgment. You knew exactly what you were doing every step of the way. No one forced you to sign that contract in my name!"

It was the quiet gasp coming from the princess, still sitting at the table only a few feet from me, that reminded me of my location. The audience to this unfolding drama. The error I had made by confirming that a contract had been involved in my disappearance.

“I know I made a mistake, Isabel,” Edwin said with a quaver in his voice. “I can only hope that the duke didn’t do anything so terrible that you’ll never see your way toward forgiving me.”

“Get out,” I snapped. “You’ve accomplished your goal. So leave.”

To anyone else, I was certain my father looked contrite and forlorn as he trudged back out the door, but I had seen the flash of satisfaction in his eyes. He hadn’t come into this tavern by chance tonight.

I sank back into my seat and hid my face in my hands. “It isn’t what it sounds like.”

“Indeed?” the princess said archly. “So the Duke of Truthhold, with control over the most powerful node in the kingdom, did not abuse his power and force you out to his estate against your will? How is it that your father could sign such a contract? You are several years beyond your majority.”

I lifted my head. “Not all the laws in Nemya have caught up with women’s rights. Which is a fact I’m certain Duke Felix will bring to your attention once his current troubles are solved. There are extenuating circumstances.”

“Miss Cardh, I cannot accept such non-answers at this point. Explain.”

“I can’t. I’m bound by a non-disclosure clause.”

“Then I suppose the holiday portion of my visit is over. We will ride to Rose Castle first thing tomorrow, and I will expect a full accounting from Duke Felix, magical indisposition or no.”

THIRTY-NINE

FELIX



THE ENCHANTMENTS AROUND my home flashed, drawing me out of my thoughts of Isa and back to the physical world. Two people had ridden onto castle lands. I studied what the magic told me. Cecily and Marc had come calling.

One claw twitched, the instinct to banish them from the hill strong. I resisted the urge. It was time to confront them and learn what they had hoped to achieve. Even if they wouldn't speak to me, I didn't like the idea of turning them away and then not knowing where they had gone. Whether I could regain my human form or not, the princess and whoever she brought with her would come to Rose Castle within a few days. Having the people responsible for my condition locked up might be helpful.

Also, I looked forward to their reactions when they saw my new size.

I made my way to the great hall, then contemplated the best place to lie in wait. A quick adjustment of the two chairs I had never removed gave me the perfect spot. I settled on the chair facing away from the front entrance, careful to keep every inch of my fur hidden. I tracked Cecily and Marc's progress, throwing open the front doors of the castle when they stood only paces away.

They paused. Then Marc strode through. I heard him tell Cecily to get inside, his voice harsh. It took her another heartbeat to enter. With a quick tug on the node's magic, I closed and locked the front doors, wishing I could have slammed them shut on Cecily's heels.

She must have heard the lock click, because she moved back to the doorway, saying something too low for me to hear.

Marc spoke at a normal volume. "It doesn't matter if it is locked. Once you get to the node, we'll be in control of the castle. Come on."

It took only a few seconds for them to cross the foyer to the great hall, Marc one step in front of Cecily. I waited until they were a few steps inside the room, but still plenty distant from the node to speak. “You won’t be reaching the node.”

“And how do you think to stop us?” Despite his words, I knew Marc had already stopped. I studied his position through the castle’s enchantments carefully, waiting until he took that next step. Then I leapt from the chair, prowling forward until I stood directly in front of the marble plinth, the flames casting a flickering light over me.

Cecily screamed, wrenching herself back and free of the grip Marc had on her upper arm. The secretary wasn’t unfazed himself, taking a step back.

“I thought you said he was a cat!” To my surprise, Cecily didn’t turn and run, but glared at Marc.

“I am a cat,” I said in my laziest drawl. I lifted a paw and flexed my claws. “See?”

“He was smaller before,” Marc said, anger replacing fear. “It doesn’t matter what size he is. Our plan will still work.”

I lowered my paw, settling into position in front of the node. “And what plan is that?”

Marc made a sharp gesture with his hand, cutting Cecily off before she could answer. “We aren’t telling you.”

“And I’m not letting you approach the node, so I suppose we are at an impasse.”

“There are two of us and only one of you.”

“Ah, but I have more impressive teeth and claws than both of you combined.” I didn’t move from my spot in front of the plinth, but if they tried to come closer, I would strike. I couldn’t take the risk of letting Cecily pass another Truth through the node.

I knew, without a doubt, that I had granted the aspects of binding to Isa, but I wasn’t as certain that Cecily’s tie to the node had disappeared. Most likely, Isa’s interpretation of that Truth was correct, and only one person could have the extra node-tie at a time, but I would not test the theory.

Belatedly, I realized I shouldn’t have indulged my flair for the dramatic and revealed myself in the great hall. I could have locked the doors and confronted Cecily and Marc elsewhere. Then I could have

locked them in whatever room I wanted. But in order to get them out of the great hall, I would have to move to a different room and summon them, and I could not guarantee that Cecily wouldn't reach the node first.

We truly were at an impasse.

I shook my head. No. I was the Duke of Truthhold, with the full power of the node at my call. There might be limitations to what I could do, but I still had several options to tilt the scales in my favor. If nothing else, I would finally learn why Marc and Cecily had cursed me.

I pulled on the node's power, flinging it out in front of me. Neither Marc nor Cecily had taken a step closer. The threat of my claws was enough to prevent progress, but not send them fleeing. Perhaps the threat of betraying their secrets would make them leave. I could run to another room and summon them before they reached the bottom of the hill. Then tomorrow evening I'd tell Isa about my prisoners.

I built node power up around Marc, but I knew it wasn't a truth-telling spell. Not yet. If I wanted to force answers, I needed the power to pour over him, not just build up into a cage around him. My attention shifted to Cecily. Would she be a better target for my questions?

I had thought that it might be harder to use the power against her, as she was a truth-teller herself, but that slight shift in focus was enough to make the magic snap into place. A haze of blue covered her from head to toe in my magical sight.

I purred, the sound a menacing rumble in my new form. "Why did you curse me?"

"You were supposed to fall in love with me. Marry me. It would have been easier that way."

"What would have been easier?"

Marc's eyes narrowed. He grabbed Cecily's arm, but she shook him off. "Gaining a tie to the node. Getting the power I deserve!"

"He's truth-telling you." Marc snarled. "Shut up."

"I don't care! What does it matter if he knows?"

To my surprise, Marc didn't protest any further, though he glowered at both me and Cecily. I kept the stream of power pouring over her. "How did turning me into a cat help you gain power?"

"That wasn't about power. That was revenge. How dare you consider yourself better than me? Marc was mad at me, but it was worth it."

I wondered for a moment if truth-telling always resulted in people answering as if they were drunk, their thoughts coming in a torrent. Maybe it was just Cecily, taking pleasure in venting her feelings. “Why did you start rumors in Leort about Isa?”

Cecily laughed. “She was merely convenient. The point was to make people mistrust you. Then, once we’ve convinced the princess that you’ve been abusing your power, the royal family will want to strip you of the title. But they can’t. The node and the Truthholder inheritance contracts make the situation too difficult. That’s where I come in.”

Marc’s eyes glittered, and I realized why he had allowed Cecily to continue talking. He might not have explained the plan himself, but he wanted me to hear it. He wanted me to realize how brilliant he was and how trapped I was.

But I didn’t feel particularly trapped. Marc and Cecily were no match for me and Isa. Not in the long run.

“As your wife,” Cecily continued, her words bringing a growl to my throat, “one with a tie to the node herself, the royal family won’t have to worry about Truthholder inheritance laws. They can lock you up for your crimes and leave me in place as the duchess, since I’ll be able to perform your duties with regards to the node.”

I almost laughed at that. Marc wasn’t as brilliant as he thought. Cecily might have had a tie to the node, but she’d never be able to witness contracts unless I made her my proxy. Even if she married me, that wouldn’t grant her the primary node-tie. “How do you expect to make me sign a marriage contract?”

“I don’t need you to sign. I can create Truths with only my signature.”

“And how do you plan to explain my present form to Her Highness?”

Cecily pouted. “I’ll turn you back once everything else is settled.”

“If you really want to regain your human form,” Marc added, “You can speed the entire process up by stepping aside.”

“I think not. Fur and claws are preferable to getting locked up for crimes I didn’t commit.”

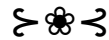
“You’ll be locked up either way,” Marc sneered. “But if you want to end up in a menagerie instead of a jail, so be it.”

I released my grip on the node, letting the power fade. “I don’t think I’ll be the one who ends up in a cell. You can’t honestly expect to get away with this.”

My former secretary took a step forward. “The truth is what we say it is now.”

He took another step, and I bared my teeth. I hadn’t looked in a mirror since changing my size, but Marc’s reaction assured me that my teeth had changed as dramatically as my claws. He froze.

I settled down. Now it was a waiting game.



THE HOURS STRETCHED. Cecily looked longingly at the chairs by the node and eventually settled on the floor. Soon she stretched out and fell asleep. Marc paced, but the late hour was getting to him, too.

I curled up in front of the node, my eyes narrow slits as I watched him.

Then I felt another presence at Truthhold. What was Isa doing back here? I unlocked the front doors, though it would take her a few more minutes to reach them. Had I summoned her? Damn it, dragging her back to Rose Castle in the middle of the night would not do me any favors with her.

With my attention centered elsewhere, I almost missed Marc’s charge. He shrugged off his jacket and ran at me with it stretched between his hands. “Cecily, now!”

I couldn’t watch Cecily as she shot to her feet—not asleep, after all. Marc lunged, attempting to wrap the jacket around me, but though he blinded me, he did nothing to restrict my legs. My paws. My claws.

I swiped out and felt cloth and flesh tear. The acrid tang of blood hit me, the warm wetness dripping from my claws to splatter against the marble floor.

Marc screamed and scrambled backward, the jacket falling from me. Cecily went white and halted her rush toward the node. It was hard to tell, with his hand pressed against his abdomen, but I didn’t think I had scratched too deeply. Not a life-threatening injury, but a shock of pain all the same.

He’d survive, and Isa would be inside within moments. If she summoned Marc and Cecily to a different room, we could lock them up and figure out what to do next.

FORTY

ISABEL



AFTER MY DISASTROUS supper with the princess, I had listened to Felix's report in almost a fugue state. What did it matter? We were out of time. I only hoped that he could convince Princess Charmina that his actions had been justified. The threat of nodes coming unlocked, the risk of wars over the pools of magic, ought to make her sympathetic to his plight.

Having my father sign a contract that forced me to Rose Castle was nothing when weighed against that. And Felix had done nothing else wrong.

Hearing Felix's voice didn't help tonight. Not when I knew the next time I heard it, he'd be forced to defend himself. Even hearing that he had located the scroll with the original wording of the curse couldn't bring a spark of hope. Too little, too late.

Then he read the curse aloud, and hope was a painful knot in my chest. To break the curse, someone needed to admit their love for Felix. Had I ever done that? No equivocations, no doubts?

I whispered the words, knowing by now that they were the absolute truth. "I love Felix Truthholder."

Through the mirror, I heard him bid me goodnight.

It wasn't a surprise that nothing had happened. I wasn't at Truthhold. Moreover, the node worked best through the written word. Perhaps it wasn't too little, but it might still be too late.

I could wait until tomorrow, but wouldn't it be better to transform Felix before the princess arrived? There was still time. Hours to go before morning. But Rose Castle was miles away. At the very least, I needed a mount.

I ran through the streets of Leort, not caring what people would think. Berklay was still at the Truthhold offices, and he didn't argue about me

taking Felix's mare. He honored my sense of urgency, though I knew he wanted to demand answers.

I rode out of Leort before twilight gave way to true night, pushing Felix's mount as much as I dared. I needed the mare to carry me to Rose Castle and back before morning. At first I had thought it would be enough to reach Felix and break the curse before Princess Charmina arrived, but the longer I rode, the more I realized that it would be a mistake to disappear and let her find me at the castle ahead of her. I wanted to allay her suspicions, not add to them.

The distance I had to travel was too far to gallop, or even canter, the entire way. It took hours before I saw the towers, the bits of glass not covered by roses glittering in the moonlight where they rose up from the hill in front of me. I pushed the mare for a last burst of speed.

When we reached castle grounds, I dismounted, pulling the saddle free with a twitch of magic, setting into motion the invisible spells that would care for the mare and see her settled for the night with another. Thank Tsy I had learned those Truths during the days Felix had failed to convince the node to allow me to leave. If the magical care wasn't enough, I would borrow a different mount for the return journey, though Felix had told me that his gelding wasn't as easy for a novice to ride.

I listened to the power suffusing the hillside, expecting to sense that Felix was in his rooms, asleep. But the magic informed me that he was in the great hall, steps away from the node. And he wasn't alone.

I pulled the enchanted mirror out of the satchel hanging from my shoulder and triggered the enchantment. I didn't need the magic to hear the scream that came from the castle moments later. Dropping the enchantment, I eased the front door open and eased inside. Better to go unnoticed than rush into a potentially dangerous situation.

The doors to the great hall stood open wide, but the two people closest to the foyer didn't notice my arrival.

I recognized Lady Cecily, standing with her profile toward me, her jaw slack as she stared at Marc. She looked to be on the verge of fainting, but it was the secretary who had hunched over in obvious pain.

The scream hadn't been Felix, then. Thank the gods.

I spotted the duke, his familiar form outlined by the flickering glow of the node behind him.

I blinked. His head was level with the flames as he sat. He was no longer a house cat, but a panther. A fluffy panther.

Gold-green eyes met mine, and I held up the mirror, reengaging the enchantment. He understood, and I heard a whisper through the magic, though he spoke so softly not even a hint of a sound came from the great hall. "Can you summon Marc and Cecily into a different room and lock them in? I don't want to leave them in with the node, just in case."

I nodded at Felix and moved as quietly as I could down the hall to the nearest room. It was the blue salon, so I took a moment to lock the doors to the library before summoning Cecily, followed by Marc. They materialized in the room, and Marc fell to his knees. From this angle, I could see the blood on his shirt.

I summoned a roll of bandages and a jar of salve and shoved them at Cecily. "Tend to his wounds."

Not waiting to see if she listened, I backed out of the room. Marc attempted to get to his feet, no doubt anticipating what was about to happen, but blood loss or the disorientation from being summoned made him fumble. I slammed the door shut and triggered the wisp of node power that would lock it so that not even a key would get them out.

When I turned around, Felix stood in the hall a few feet away. I didn't think. I ran over, dropped to my knees, and threw my arms around him. "Are you all right? I saw the blood on Marc."

Felix rubbed his cheek against mine, his fur soft as silk. "He decided to test my determination not to let anyone close to the node. Luckily, my new claws are more daunting than my old."

"Not daunting enough, if he still came at you."

"But it took him hours to summon the courage." Felix pulled back, looking at me with concern. "What are you doing here? Did the node pull you back?"

"No." I realized it was true and had a moment to wonder why I hadn't felt the node tugging at me the instant I had realized that I could possibly break the curse. Then again, I hadn't needed the node to urge me into action. "I came because I have an idea about how to break the curse. It occurred to me when you read the scroll this evening."

"I knew you'd have more ideas than me. What is it?"

I hesitated. It was one thing to say the sentence aloud in the privacy of my room. Even admitting my feelings to Sofia hadn't been so difficult.

But could I say it to Felix, when I still didn't know why he had been so intent on sending me back to Leort? "Let's see if it works first."

We walked back to the great hall, Felix a solid presence at my side. He kept so close that I had to rest my hand on his back or risk toppling over. Felix summoned a side table—complete with paper, pen, and ink—without comment. I wrote out four simple words, the same ones that had taken me so long to admit, to say, and signed my name. Then, holding my breath, I held the paper to the flames.

Bells rang out, their harmonious melody declaring the words to be completely true, but nothing else happened. I blinked back an unexpected rush of tears. It wasn't enough. I couldn't make Truths. I wiped at my eyes with the back of my hand. No. I refused to believe that I had to make a Truth to break the curse. It didn't make sense. Cecily had already created the Truth; I was simply fulfilling the terms by admitting I had fallen in love with Felix.

But a declaration wasn't enough. It still had to be tied to the node. I couldn't make a Truth, but Felix could witness a contract I signed and use the node to make the words magically binding. I considered the consequences of letting him pass my note through the node. This wasn't a normal contract; it was a statement of feelings. What would it mean to bind myself to the words?

I thought about that clarion of bells I had heard when I held it to the flames. It was already true. The node's power wouldn't change anything.

Felix was watching me, not saying anything. I shoved the paper at him, still folded. "Witness this and pass it through the node."

He dipped his claw in ink and signed his name, not asking what it said or unfolding the paper first. Then he grabbed it with his teeth and planted his front paws on the edge of the copper bowl under the flames. He leaned forward. The paper dissolved, and I heard the magic of the node pour out, converging on Felix.

His eyes went wide, and he froze, his body unnaturally still as the power rushed into him.

His body convulsed, and he fell to the floor. I rushed forward, but I didn't know if it was safe to touch him. The magic kept coming, an avalanche of power. I wanted to clasp my hands over my ears, but it wouldn't block anything.

I waited, my heart in my throat, as black fur receded, bones stretched and shrank, and a cat transformed into a man.

A naked man.

I didn't let myself dwell on this detail, though I couldn't help but notice. It sent an unexpected surge of warmth through me. I had almost grown used to the way Felix made me feel, but this gave the emotions an edge I wasn't prepared to dwell on. I knew what it was, but lust had no place in this moment.

Even if Felix was sprawled on the floor in front of me, naked.

I closed the last bit of distance between us and dropped to my knees at his side. "Felix?"

He groaned and slowly blinked his eyes open. They were no longer a gold-green, but a brilliant emerald—a perfect match for the stones he had given me. His hair was still onyx black, just long enough to remind me of his fur. "What happened?"

He lifted a hand, brushing at a lock of hair obscuring his eye, and froze. He stretched his arm out, turning his hand over, flexing his fingers. Then he tried to sit up, but could barely lift himself.

I slid my arm behind his back and helped him, mentally chastising myself as I noticed the feel of his skin beneath my fingertips. It was cool to the touch. He needed to recover from the transformation. And put on something warm.

He was still focused on his hand. His words slurred. "You broke the curse. You really did it."

With a sudden burst of energy, he twisted beside me, his hands coming up to frame my face. He kissed me.

My thoughts shattered, the pieces scattering in every direction. I'd been kissed before, but had never cared much for it. I hadn't understood why people wanted to press lips together, let alone more.

I understood now. With the right person, a kiss became so much more. It was a connection. A promise. A truth.

I didn't need to think, only feel and react. The hand on Felix's back slid across skin, and he shuddered. He tilted his head, changing the angle, licking at my lips until my own parted. Sensation swirled through me, my mind trying to pin down a foreign experience in terms I knew. Port and autumn leaves falling, the warmth of a fire and the silk of a rose petal.

I moved my hand around to rest over Felix's heart, the frantic beat a match for my own pulse.

He pulled back, pupils dilated, and toppled backwards. He barely caught himself, then his hands slipped, and he was prone once more.

I leaned over him. "Felix?" My breath came in gasps as I tried to adjust after that kiss. "Are you all right?"

He blinked at me. "Sorry. Shouldn't have . . ."

"It's—" Not all right. The truth-telling enchantment wouldn't let me say the words. I blinked back tears, grateful that in his current state, Felix wouldn't notice. The kiss that had meant so much to me had been nothing more than a stress-reaction for him. I cleared my throat. "You should probably lay down."

"I am laying down." He spoke slowly, forming each word with care. "Though I'm not a fan of resting on a marble floor."

I reached for him again, helping him sit up. "A bed would be better, I'm certain. I can call one in. I don't think you should try to move very far."

He shook his head. "My room."

"Felix—"

"My. Room. We're not staying here."

I ignored his use of "we," but I couldn't ignore the stubborn glint in his eyes. He was struggling to sit up, weaker now than before our kiss, but that wouldn't stop him from crawling up to his room if he had to. I could go ahead and summon him, but given his current state, I couldn't imagine the disorientation would be wise. Especially if his mild reactions in the past had to do with his smaller form.

"If we can get you upright, then I'll help you upstairs. Otherwise, I'm calling in a bed here."

"I can stand," Felix insisted.

It took considerable effort on both our parts, and Felix trembled with fatigue, but he was standing. I made him lean on the chair closest to us and disentangled myself long enough to call in a dressing gown. Felix mumbled as he slipped it on, but I couldn't make out the words.

Then he slung an arm over my shoulders and we hobbled out of the great hall. It was an awkward picture we made, but that didn't stop Felix. He grimly made his way upstairs.

"Was it like this when you transformed into a cat?" I asked.

“I think I was unconscious longer that time.” He stopped, his eyes closing. I waited with him, trying to steady him as his balance grew even worse. Then his eyes opened again. When he spoke, finishing his earlier thought as though there had been no interruption, I wondered if he even realized how long he had paused. “And Berklay was able to carry me to my room.”

We reached his suite. By this point Felix could do little more than shuffle his feet forward, and I was supporting most of his weight. I gratefully let him tilt onto the bed, stepping back.

His hand snapped out with surprising speed. “Where are you going?”

My lips parted. Under other circumstances, I knew the kiss we had shared downstairs might have morphed into something else. Something more. But that wasn’t the same. “You need to rest.”

His grip tightened. “I know. But I don’t want you to leave. Please, Isa.”

“I can’t stay.” Not shouldn’t. Couldn’t. “Princess Charmina is coming to Rose Castle tomorrow. I need to get back to Leort before she realizes I rode out here tonight. It will cause you more problems if I stay. I’ll find a way to bring a few constables along to deal with Marc and Cecily, too.”

“Isa—”

I gently freed my hand, but couldn’t resist the urge to reach out and brush my fingers over his cheeks. “I have to go. I don’t want you to suffer because my actions reinforce the rumors. Tomorrow you have to remember to treat me with polite distance and nothing more.”

Felix blinked, and I knew he was on the verge of falling unconscious once more. I hated to leave him like this, but I had to. He’d wake tomorrow morning, recovered from the transformation and ready to deal with the princess. My presence would only make things worse.

FORTY-ONE

FELIX



THE HEADACHE PULLED me awake. The world was fuzzy, my thoughts a disjointed mess, but the pain throbbing at my temples was clear. I reached up to rub them and started when I realized I had hands. I tried to remember what had happened the night before.

Marc and Cecily had come, but I kept them from using the node. Then, in the middle of the night, Isa had arrived. Ignoring the headache, I reached out with my magical senses, scanning the castle. Marc and Cecily were locked in the blue salon, but Isa was nowhere to be found. What had happened?

I remembered Isa writing something, then making me sign it. I had held it to the node, the bright blue when it transformed into a scroll in the archives almost blinding. Then there had been pain. So much pain. My mind shied away from the memory.

She had broken the curse.

I tried to remember the minutes after that, but everything after the transformation was a blur. Memories came to me in snippets that followed no particular order. Vaguely, I remembered pressing my lips to hers, her hands on me, and I was annoyed that the memory wasn't clearer. Then I remembered asking her to stay and her refusing. Maybe I didn't want to remember that kiss.

No, damn it. I wanted—*needed*—to remember. But the harder I tried, the more the memories slipped away. I groaned and rolled out of bed. My dressing gown gaped and tangled around my legs, and I recalled the cold marble under me.

So. I had transformed back into a man, kissed Isa, and begged her to stay. During at least part of that I had been naked, and now she was nowhere to be found on castle grounds.

The light coming into my bedroom was stronger than it should have been. I had slept well past morning. First, I'd eat. Well, after I got dressed. Then I'd decide how to approach Isa next.

I'd have to deal with Marc and Cecily, too.

My headache grew, and I sat back on the edge of the bed. Tea. A cup—no, pot—of strong black tea was what I needed. I summoned the pot, ignoring the way the use of magic made my head hurt worse. The joy of being able to pour a cup for myself almost made up for it. As I sipped, I tried not to think too hard about the night before, knowing the memories would come easier if I let them surface naturally.

It left me with little to think about except how I wanted to handle Marc and Cecily. I could keep them trapped until the princess and her entourage arrived in a few days—a few days? Why did that sound wrong?—but then I needed a story to tell Her Highness.

I'd have to tell her the truth. It wasn't as embarrassing to admit I had been cursed now that I was human again. Granted, I didn't want word to get out that other people could gain ties to the Truthhold node, even if it wasn't unlocked. Hopefully, Princess Charmina would appreciate the need for discretion.

By the time I had eaten and dressed, I felt a bit more myself. It was strange, feeling like a stranger in my own skin, but I had adjusted to being a cat within a few days. Surely I could readapt to human form faster. A mug of willow bark tea dimmed the edges of my headache, and I left my room.

I didn't know where I intended to go, but my feet carried me to the node without hesitation. I sank into one of the chairs next to the brazier and stared at the flames.

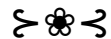
Bright blue. Truth. Whatever Isa had written to break the curse had been an absolute truth. So why hadn't she explained her plan to me? She had even left the paper folded when she asked me to sign it. Maybe I could find the scroll in the archives. Would it help to know how she had broken the curse?

Magic flared, and I sensed half a dozen people crossing the boundary into castle lands. I recognized three of the sparks: Isa, Berklay, and the constable who had tried to break in not a week ago.

I stood up and moved to the front doors. I didn't care who the others were; I needed to speak to Isa. Opening the front door, I watched the crowd

dismount. I couldn't see Isa behind the others, but though I wanted to push past everyone, I couldn't help but notice the young woman in the center of the group. Flanked by two royal guards, her identity was obvious at a single glance.

I bowed. "Your Highness. I did not expect you for a few more days. I have no staff in residence at present, so please allow me to take care of your mounts using the enchantments of Rose Castle."



AFTER AN AWKWARD round of introductions, we all filed into the castle, through the great hall, and seated ourselves in the meeting room. Well, everyone but the guards seated themselves. Princess Charmina ended up in my usual spot between the two long tables. Isa and the constable sat at one table, Berklay and I at the other across from them.

I had tried to catch Isa's eye several times already, but she was determined not to look at me. When I noticed the way her constable friend watched me, I stopped, worried that my fixation would only cause more problems. The princess had already made it clear that her purpose in coming out to Rose Castle had shifted since she left Haiwella. The contract she needed witnessed was no longer her priority.

"I am glad to see that whatever magical ailment that afflicted you seems to be cured, Your Grace." The princess spoke with grave formality, though I got the impression it was not her natural inclination. "Fortuitous timing, that, after three months, you get well just in time for my arrival."

"The timing is not wholly coincidental. The magical ailment was, in fact, a curse that I broke only hours ago. For months I made no progress, but between Miss Cardh's brilliance and an unexpected run in with those responsible last night, I was finally able to break the spell."

I hated taking credit for Isa's efforts, but the way her whole body went stiff when I mentioned her name, I figured she didn't want to be tied to my cure so directly. I didn't know why, but it fit with her leaving the night before.

"A curse?" Princess Charmina's aloof mask cracked, and for a moment she was just a young woman, both shocked and intrigued. "I was under the impression that curses required more power than most mages possess."

"Indeed, but a node changes things."

“Then a member of your own family was responsible? Is the Truthhold line squabbling for power?”

An easy lie. All I had to do was agree with the princess’s conclusions and I could avoid sharing the relative ease with which people could gain access to my node. But no matter what else I said, such a lie would cause Her Highness to look at my cousin askance. Charlotte didn’t deserve to be under suspicion.

“No. If anything, my relatives are impatient for me to add to the family and push them even further down the line of succession.” I looked around the room, meeting everyone’s eyes but Isa’s. “There was reason for the secrecy surrounding what happened to me, and I hope you all will appreciate the possible consequences of the story spreading beyond these walls when I tell you that someone used the considerable magic of the Truthhold node to curse me into the form of a beast.”

“If not a relative, then—” Princess Charmina gasped. “The Truthhold node is unlocked?”

“Thankfully, no. Though that was my first fear as well. It wasn’t until Miss Cardh began working for me that we discovered that Lady Cecily had gained a tie to the node through me.”

The princess’s eyes narrowed at the mention of Cecily, but she didn’t interrupt. I recounted what had happened, my foolish reliance on a secretary who turned out to be my curser’s accomplice, the discoveries Isa had made, and the events of the night before. I glossed over how Isa came to work for me and omitted her presence at the castle the night before entirely. When I finished, there was a moment of silence.

Princess Charmina’s eyes were wide, and it took her a moment to remember that she was the only person in the room who outranked me, and that it fell on her to pass judgment. She looked back at her guards. “Peter, I’d like you to question His Grace’s prisoners alongside Constable Berklay.”

The male guard nodded.

“Go straight through the great hall and turn left.” I told the men. “They are in the corner room. I will unlock it once you are at the door.”

The constable didn’t get up. “I’m not going anywhere until I know what you did with Isa.”

“I’ve already informed you that she used her familiarity with truth-magics and a patience I don’t possess to help me understand the node

better. She discovered Marc's deceptions and paved the way for me to break the curse."

"But why was she at Rose Castle in the first place? There are some pretty damning rumors going around Leort, and I'm not satisfied they are without merit."

"I am familiar with the rumors you are referring to," I told him, aware that the princess was listening to our exchange with rapt attention. "They were a part of Marc's plan to discredit me, as I already explained. Miss Cardh was here to help me break the curse, nothing more. Though I suppose, to reassure you, I shall have to relinquish the little bit of dignity I maintained having told you of the curse. The term beast might have given you a false impression. I spent the past few months as a cat, Constable. Nothing untoward happened with Miss Cardh."

He grumbled, and Isa said something to him in a voice too low to hear, her expression fierce. Frederic looked at her, then away. He stood and joined the guard, Peter. "Let's see these prisoners, then."

They left. The princess watched me for a few heartbeats, then stood. "I'd like a private word please, Your Grace."

I followed her to the corner of the room farthest from Isa, feeling her guard's stare with every step. Berklay moved around to stand by Isa, leaving the princess and me alone on one side of the room.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"I understand your reasons for secrecy and desire not to name the exact manner in which a person can tie themselves to the node without being born into the Truthholder family. I can respect those secrets. But there is something else you talked around that I cannot ignore."

I waited.

"How did Miss Cardh come to help you, when you had sent everyone but your secretary away months prior?"

"There is a law, a remnant from generations ago, that details the hierarchy among male relations in determining authority over women." I spoke slowly, not sure why I didn't try to prevaricate, but certain that I needed to tell the truth. Perhaps I wanted the princess to condemn me, for she had the power that others lacked, and I needed to be held accountable for what I had done. "Edwin Cardh came to Rose Castle about two months after I was cursed, hoping to steal from me. When I caught him, I offered an exchange. I'd let him go free if he sent his daughter to help me break

the curse. Because of this law, Edwin, as Isa's closest male relative, was able to sign in her name and make the contract binding."

Princess Charmina's eyes went wide. "How can that be legal?"

"A technicality. The node is not sentient. It does not judge the spirit of the law, only the letter. It cannot understand that the law granting women legal rights strips their male relatives of the right to sign for them. I abused this loophole to force Isa's presence."

"You admit it was an abuse of power?"

"I do. I plan to see the old law struck down as soon as possible. But I want you to know that I did not subvert the law lightly. It is not an excuse for what I did, but if I had not genuinely believed that my node had been unlocked and feared the result of word getting out, I would never have done such a thing."

Princess Charmina pursed her lips. "Your words might offer a sliver of reassurance, if I didn't wonder if you are immune to the truth-telling enchantment enveloping your home."

I nodded, conceding the point. "I am, indeed, immune. However, Isa can truth-read me if you seek reassurance."

Her Highness looked over to where Isa stood. "Miss Cardh, may I borrow you for a moment?"

Isa straightened and hurried over, her attention firmly fixed on the princess. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"With a simple yes or no, please answer this question. Can you truth-read Duke Felix right now?"

She almost looked at me, but stopped herself. "Yes."

Princess Charmina turned back to me. "Your Grace, if you'd had no reason to suspect that your node was unlocked and had only the task of transforming yourself back into human form as motivation, would you have signed that contract with Edwin Cardh?"

"No."

I watched Isa, willing her to look at me. She didn't. But her eyes widened, a reaction that the princess did not overlook.

"Miss Cardh?"

"He spoke the truth."

"It surprised you."

Isa leveled a steady gaze on Her Highness. "It did not surprise me that his words were technically true. It was the degree to which they were true."

There was no hint of subterfuge or misdirection. Based on what I sensed, I feel confident in saying that His Grace is not only giving an answer with the clarity of hindsight. At no point in time would he ever have signed that contract, if it was only his own form at risk.”

“That is reassuring to hear. Thank you, Miss Cardh.”

Isa recognized the dismissal and walked away, still not meeting my eyes, though my gaze didn’t waver.

“You have provided me with reassurance on this one point, Your Grace, but you must admit that it is a shaky foundation. The Truthhold node is powerful beyond comprehension. To know that such a subversion of the law is possible, that the node will bind people to do that which a human would deem illegal, is worrying. I plan to bring this issue to the attention of my parents. I don’t know what they will say, but I think, at the very least, someone should inspect contracts for hidden surprises before they are witnessed and passed through the node.”

“I recently had a similar thought, Your Highness. I serve as a mediator between parties during negotiations, but I have always left the wording of the final contract up to those involved. It occurred to me that having someone go over the contracts on my behalf might be wise. Instead of letting my neutral status keep me from helping either side, I should instead actively protect all parties from malicious contractual language.”

“I think it might be better if this person is hired by the crown, rather than answering to you.”

“May I recommend someone for the position? I don’t think you’ll have any reason to doubt her abilities or integrity.”

Princess Charmina looked at Isa. “I had been thinking of enticing Miss Cardh back to Haiwella. I know she would like the chance to get away from the prejudices entrenched in Leort.” She glanced at me and smiled. “But perhaps not so far away.”

FORTY-TWO

ISABEL



I LAID THE two letters side by side on the table, absently smoothing out the creases. At first glance, the contents were similar. Both offered me a chance at a job after a meeting. But one was an invitation, the job an unknown. The other was a summons, the job one I had fought for and lost.

An uncertain future.

An unsatisfactory past.

I folded the letters back up. I'd meet with Chief Nassan because I was curious about what he would say. But even if he offered me my post with the constables again—with or without probationary in front of my title—I wouldn't accept. What I didn't know was whether I'd take Princess Charmina up on her offer.

She had questioned me the entire ride back to Leort. I had shared stories—and frustrations—from my time with the constables earlier as I guided her around town, but she had started asking about what I had done for Felix. She wanted to know how comfortable I was with contracts and how intimately I knew the laws of the kingdom. Then she had offered me a letter that would grant me an audience with her in Haiwella if I sought a career in the capital.

She had implied that she wouldn't be surprised if I never made it to the city, though. She had hinted that I'd get an offer closer to home that would appeal more. Was the letter from Chief Nassan what she meant? Had I spent the last four days hoping for something that would never happen?

If only I was a mind-reader instead of a truth-reader. Then I'd know what Felix had been thinking. Had our kiss meant anything to him, or had the giddiness of relief swept him away? I simply didn't know, and I found

it easier to interpret his expressions and body language as a cat than as a man.

He'd tried to catch my eye during the princess's visit, but speaking with him then wasn't a possibility. Felix might have allayed the worst of her misgivings about how he had used the node against me, but Frederic had returned from questioning Marc and Cecily more suspicious than ever. He didn't believe that my time at Rose Castle had been pleasant.

After Felix had admitted to being a cat for months, I didn't understand my mentor's worries, but I couldn't ignore them either. Marc's rumors had spread through town so quickly. If Frederic spoke out against the duke, public opinion would turn against him even faster. The only thing stopping Frederic from speaking out was the fact that saying anything would drag my name through the wringer, too.

If I ran off to Truthhold, Frederic might take the risk, deciding that inciting the citizens of Leort against the duke would protect me.

But Felix could come here.

I had hoped he would. I had thought he would. He knew about the rumors, knew how damaging it would be for me to disappear again, even if I didn't have to leave without a word this time. But maybe the looks he had sent my way a few days ago hadn't meant what I thought. Maybe the kiss had been just a kiss and his request for me to stay the night had meant nothing.

Tsy take it, even if it had all meant nothing, I still expected him to come. I thought I knew him well enough to anticipate his need for an answer on how I had broken the curse.

But four days later, he still hadn't come.

A sharp double tap on the door had me stuffing the letters in my pocket. If Frederic was back to question me some more, I would scream. I appreciated his concern, but not his certainty that the duke had bewitched me. If he wouldn't believe my answers, then he needed to stop asking questions.

I opened the door, but the man on the other side wasn't Frederic.

I had waited for Felix—expected to see him for days—but now that he had come, the only thing I could say was, “What are you doing here?”

“Really? You don't feel like we still have some unresolved business?”

The setting sun glinted behind him, adding gold highlights to his black hair. I stared, drinking in the sight of him. When he'd first transformed, I

had marveled too much at the change—and worried too much about his weakness—to truly take in his appearance. And with Frederic and Her Highness watching, I hadn't dared to look too closely the last time I had seen him. But now, I could let my gaze linger on the strong line of his jaw, the way his doublet emphasized the planes of his chest, the long fingers that had brushed over my cheeks as his lips found mine.

The sounds of everyday life, boots on cobbles, doors squeaking open and slamming shut, reminded me that staring for long moments still wasn't my brightest idea. A few people walking down the street glanced our direction—I was still an object of gossip around town.

I grabbed Felix's arm and pulled him inside, slamming the door shut. His eyebrows went up. "You could have simply invited me in."

"There wasn't time to argue with you. Do you realize that Marc told Frederic that you can lie despite the truth-telling enchantment on Rose Castle? He is questioning everything you said now. Even your admission of being a cat."

"I might be able to lie, but even at Truthhold, you can read me."

"Frederic isn't accepting my reassurances. He's convinced you took advantage of me. Fooled me. Probably seduced me."

Felix's gaze fell to my lips. "I certainly wanted to." He looked up again, shaking his head ever so slightly. "But you are a confusing woman, Isa."

My heart beat faster. "What does that mean?"

"I couldn't figure you out, so I hunted through the archives to learn how you broke the curse first."

I swallowed.

"It took a bit. I knew from my earlier efforts that your scroll would be in the center of the maze, with all the most truthful contracts. Even with a rough idea of where to look, though, it still took time. But I found it. I read what you wrote, Isa. I saw the flames. Your words were the absolute truth. You love me. So why did you run?"

Indignation replaced nervousness. "I didn't run!"

"No?" He gestured at the room. "Then why are you here instead of at Rose Castle with me?"

"Because I love you, damn it! I explained this. If Princess Charmina had discovered that I rode ahead to Truthhold, she'd have thought the worst. I couldn't take the risk."

“When did you explain? You wouldn’t even look at me.”

“That night. After I helped you upstairs. I told you why I had to leave.”

Felix winced. “I can’t remember most of what happened after I transformed. I knew I asked you to stay, but then you were gone when I woke. And then you would barely even look at me the next day.”

“Because I didn’t want to add fuel to the rumors.” I swallowed. “And you had sent me away. You spent days working to convince the node to make me leave.”

He staggered back a step. “You think I wanted you gone? Isa, I love you. Of course I want you with me. But only if it is by your choice. I wanted to free you.” His hand rose toward me, then fell back to his side. “Surely you realized that?”

I shook my head, unable to form words, barely able to think anything beyond the echo of hearing him say he loved me.

He stepped closer and this time his hand made it all the way to my face, tracing over my cheekbone. “How did you think you gained a tie to the node?”

“You said . . .” I stopped. Tried again. “I had carried you around and petted you.”

He closed his eyes, pained amusement washing over him. Then he opened them again, and I couldn’t look away from that brilliant green. “What about the curse, Isa? What was the wording Cecily included that allowed me to transform back into a human?”

“If someone admitted their love for you,” I said, not understanding where he was going with this.

“No.” His hand moved around to my nape. “The curse required me to fall in love, too.”

“You really love me?”

His thumb brushed the edge of my jaw. “Can’t you hear the truth of my words? I love you, Isabel Cardh. Thorns and all.”

I could hear it, the beautiful melody of truth, but I was too shocked to accept it. Not that I didn’t believe . . . but hearing the words felt like a dream. I needed to reassure myself that I was awake. Felix’s head dipped lower, and my hands landed on his shoulders without thought. Yes. This was what I needed.

“Since I only remember bits and pieces after the transformation, I’d like to refresh one memory in particular.” He moved slowly, hesitantly, stopping with an inch still between our lips. “Isa, may I kiss you?”

I went up on tiptoe, closing that last bit of distance between us, and kissed him. His lips moved against mine, and he pulled me flush against his body. It was everything I remembered, and this time when his tongue met mine, I thought I was the one who might fall. My legs went weak, and I curled my fingers into his doublet, letting him hold me upright.

He pulled back, a familiar, mischievous glint in his eyes. “If I recall correctly, something about this kiss doesn’t match the one I’m trying to remember.”

“You knocking your head on the floor and getting a concussion?”

He startled. “What?”

“Well, it almost happened.”

“That was not what I was talking about.” He shook his head, then leaned so he could whisper in my ear. “I seem to recall fewer clothes being involved.”

I shivered, and I knew he didn’t miss the reaction. He smirked, but waited for a response.

I licked my lips, tried to speak. Nothing came out. I tried again, not quite daring to look above his shoulders. “I’ve never done this before.”

He stilled. “Do you not want to? I’m sorry, Isa. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

My hands still rested on his shoulders, and I didn’t let him step back. “I never understood the appeal before, but it’s different with you. Kissing you is . . . I can’t even describe it, but I know I like it. I want more. I want it all. But I don’t know what to do—not really.”

He wrapped his arms back around me, pressing me against the heat of his body, and rested his chin on the top of my head. “There isn’t a script to follow. We do what feels right. What feels good. And only when the time is right.”

I remained in his arms for a moment, absorbing their strength. Then I stepped back, tugging Felix along with me to the stairs. I didn’t want him to hesitate or worry that I wasn’t as eager as him. “I mean it. I want this. You just need to take the lead.”

He grinned, letting me tow him along. “You seem to be doing pretty well taking charge.”

FORTY-THREE

FELIX



ISA GLARED AT me, and I surged forward, kissing her once more. She stopped walking, her entire being devoted to kissing me back. I ran my hands down her sides, stopping on her hips, and squeezed, urging her to step back. Step by step we made it up the stairs, our lips not parting. I paused when Isa stood on the landing, a step above me, putting her at the perfect height.

I grinned against her lips, reveling in the fact that I was human again. Taller than her, able to hold her, kiss her, love her. I could hardly believe this wasn't all a dream. But my dreams were nothing compared to the feel of Isa under my fingers.

She loved me. It wasn't some trick to break the curse, or a way to twist the truth I hadn't understood. Days of doubts melted away and weeks of desire took their place. Every touch took on unexpected weight, as the need to make this perfect washed over me. It was Isa's first time, but more than that, it was *our* first time. It couldn't compare to any of my previous experiences. Kissing her was already more intimate, more passionate—just more—than anything else.

Isa urged us back into motion, and I followed her down the hall. She opened a door, pulled me through, and closed it once more. A distant part of me wanted to look around, to take in the room, to see Isa's private space, but I couldn't spare any attention for my surroundings. My mind was full of Isa. Only Isa. My hands slid up to the laces of her bodice, and she didn't hesitate to unlace my doublet. Clothes fell to the ground, accompanied by fleeting touches and whispers of "yes."

Isa stepped out of her skirts and smiled at me. No shyness, no hesitation. "Is this more like what you remembered?"

I studied her, letting my gaze linger on every detail. Bottomless russet eyes, plump pink lips. A graceful neck. I wrapped my fingers around my erection as I took in her lush breasts and the soft curves below. I squeezed when I reached the thatch of hair at the apex of her thighs. "Even better."

She grinned and nodded meaningfully at where I gripped myself. "Are you going to show me what you plan to do with that now?"

"That?" I let go so that I could pull Isa against me, one hand behind her, just above her ass, the other around her nape. "Too shy to say the word? How unexpected."

My hand drifted lower and Isa squirmed, every inch of contact between our bodies a shock to the senses. I backed her to the bed, toppling us both onto the mattress, my knees straddling her hips. I kissed my way down her throat. "I'm not going to do anything with it if you are feeling shy," I said before I sucked on the side of her breast.

She arched into me, her hands in my hair, holding me against her breast. "I'm not shy," she gasped when I moved to the other breast, this time taking her nipple into my mouth.

I blew a soft breath over her, enjoying the way she shivered. "Prove it."

She did. With a shimmy I never expected, she slid down the bed, her hands landing on my thighs. Before I could prepare, she took me in her mouth. She didn't ease into it, wet heat enveloping me in a rush. My hips jerked. "Not what I had in mind," I said in a strangled cry.

She pulled back, replacing her lips with a hand. "Are you objecting?"

Her hand pumped, and it was almost too much. With Isa, every touch was ecstasy. Control a foreign concept. "Not objecting." I pulled out of her grip. "Informing. You wanted me to take charge, didn't you?"

Her legs already dangled over the edge of the bed. I stood, shifting her slightly, then went to my knees. I pressed her thighs open wider and leaned in. The need to enter her pulsed through me, but not until I did this. I would give her pleasure first.

She tried to squeeze her legs closed when I licked, but I didn't let her. My focus narrowed to her every shift and moan, adapting my movements in response. Teasing touches frustrated her. I sucked, and she nearly came off the bed. Then I slid a finger inside, watching the sweat glisten on her skin as she closed her eyes and threw her head back. A second caused her hands to curl into the blankets.

Fingers and tongue worked together, pushing her higher and higher. When her climax hit, it was a beautiful thing. I eased her through it, then kissed my way up her quivering form.

“Felix,” she moaned.

I admit I expected words about how wonderful she felt—how wonderful I was. How glad she was that I was no longer a cat. Maybe a complaint that she was too sensitive now, as every time I pressed my lips to her skin, a shiver ran through her. But I should have known better. This was Isa.

“Now show me what you can do with your cock.”

I laughed against her throat. “I love you, Isa.”

Her eyes closed, and she shivered as if I had stroked my hand over her. “Say it again.”

“I love you.” I considered adding flowery embellishments and poetic comparisons, but this was Isa. The words themselves, with no equivocations, would be the strongest declaration I could give. “I love you.”

Her eyes opened, and the swell of emotion in them—hope, joy, love—crashed into me. “I love you, Felix, no matter what form you take.”

She lifted her head, and I molded my mouth to hers, tasting the truth of the words. I rolled us over, still kissing, and landed on my back with Isa sprawled over me. She laughed against my lips and straddled my hips. Tenderness morphed into need.

Isa reached down and positioned my cock at her entrance, her eyes locked on mine. I gripped her hips, lowering her slowly, so slowly. Finally, she had taken all of me and we both paused, her hands flat on my chest, the moment stretching.

She leaned forward, her hips rolling, and I groaned. She paused, studying me, and shifted again, rising up slightly, then lowering herself at an even more tortuous pace than before. Her smile devious, she moved up and down with languid patience as I fought not to take control and slam into her.

I slid my hands up from her hips, along her sides, and around to her breasts. I caressed, I teased, and when I finally pinched a nipple between thumb and forefinger, Isa bucked against me. I did it again, and she moved faster. Then I tilted my hips, changing the angle, and she cried out.

“Felix!” She came around me, and my own climax tore through me.

Isa collapsed against my chest, her hair tickling my chin, and I wrapped my arms around her. “Satisfied with what I can do with my cock?” I asked in the laziest drawl I could muster.

Her head moved back and forth against me in denial. “Satisfied implies having enough. I will always want more.” She craned her neck just enough to look at me. “Though I am quite satisfied with your cock.”

I grinned. “Glad to hear it, though if you weren’t, I could probably use the node to change sizes.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t you dare.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I thought you loved me no matter what form I took?”

She sat up and slapped a hand against my chest. “Of course I do, but I love you as you are, and to even suggest using the node to transform after —”

I pulled her back down. “I was only teasing, Isa. I’m sorry. And I love you just as you are, too.”

She snuggled back against me. “Really?”

“Love, you know I’m speaking the truth. Why do you have such a hard time believing it?”

She shook her head again, not speaking.

I ran my fingers through her hair. “Talk to me, Isa. Please.”

“It’s just, I know I’m not sweet and soft.”

My hand continued past the ends of her hair, down her spine and to her ass. “I like tart more than sweet, and you are soft in all the best places.”

“That’s not what I—” She shifted off me, pulling the blanket over her body. “I’m blunt and sarcastic and don’t allow people their illusions. I make everyone uncomfortable.”

“Isa, look at me.” Slowly she lifted her eyes to mine. Never would I have expected this sort of insecurity from her. But I was all too happy to wipe away her fears with the truth. “You just named my favorite things about you. I don’t love you despite those qualities. I love you because of them. And if other people can’t see your worth, well lucky me, because I don’t want to share.”

Her teeth sank into her lower lip, and the sight was enough to make my cock stir once more.

“Felix?”

“Yes?” I said as casually as I could, not wanting to diminish this moment with base desires.

“Show me. Make me feel the truth so deep I can never doubt it.”

I moved over her. That, I could do.

FORTY-FOUR

ISABEL



I WOKE UP wrapped in Felix's arms, sore in new places, languid with remembered pleasure. I was still soaring on the knowledge that Felix loved me, but the morning light slowly brought me back down to earth. I was happy, but three little words didn't make the world fall into place, no matter how deeply he branded them into my skin.

What came next?

I shifted, and Felix's arms tightened around me.

This was a moment out of time. There was still a future to plan. A well-meaning but misguided constable to deal with. Opportunities to consider and weigh in the balance.

"Why are you so tense?" Felix mumbled against my back.

"You can't stay in Leort."

He levered himself up so he could look down at me. One eyebrow quirked. "Are you banishing me from the town?"

"The Contract of Inheritance," I explained, twisting so I faced him. "You can't be away from the node for long."

He nodded. "I'll have to return tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

"How does this work, then?"

"You don't want to come back with me?"

I did. I wanted to so much it scared me. "And do what? You no longer need a truth-mage at Rose Castle."

He kissed my nose. "But I certainly want this one."

I pushed back and pulled the blanket up, tucking it under my arms. "Be serious for a moment. I can't just up and move into the castle for no reason except that I'm warming your bed. Frederic will have the entire town up in arms." I licked my lips. "And I need something more, too. I need a purpose."

“I refuse to let gossip control our lives. If you don’t want to live at Truthhold, that is one thing, but don’t make us both miserable because of the risk of rumors.” He stood up and moved around the bed, searching for his clothes. “You need to decide what you want.”

I jumped after him. “I want you. If it was just the gossip, I’d ride off to the castle and ignore Frederic’s complaints. But my life can’t just be you. We’ll both end up miserable that way.”

He had only donned his trousers so far, but he stopped looking for clothes and cupped my cheek. “What else do you want? I want you to be happy, Isa, so tell me what you need.”

“Princess Charmina told me to come see her if I wanted a job in the capital,” I said in a rush.

His eyes narrowed. “Did she? And do you want to move to Haiwella?”

I shook my head. “But what else will I do? Chief Nassan wants to meet with me, so I might still have a job with the constables, but I don’t want it. Not anymore. Even if there was an opportunity for me here, Leort is still hours from Rose Castle.”

“What if there was an opportunity at Rose Castle? A position answering to the royal family, approving contracts before they can be witnessed and bound by the node?”

“Such a position doesn’t exist. The node will only enforce contracts that are already legal. There is no oversight beyond that.”

“Not yet. But Her Highness was distressed to learn how easy it is to skirt legalities while still adhering to the law. If she has her way, there will be stricter rules governing what contracts I can witness in the future. She’s already approved you for the post, if it becomes real.”

“If it becomes real. Which could take years.”

“You met Her Highness. Do you really think she’ll let this drag out that long?”

I shook my head.

“Exactly. But even if it takes time, there is no reason you can’t start doing the same task without the crown’s backing. I’d mediate negotiations, and you’d make sure each party actually gets what they agreed to.”

“You’re offering me a job.”

“I am. The paperwork is already drawn up, should you accept.”

My head spun. “When—?”

“It might have taken me a few days to ride down to Leort, but messengers and secretaries have been making multiple trips every day since the princess’s visit. We are already shifting operations back to the castle. Well, most of them. Some people decided that they preferred working in town, so we will continue to have an office here.” He pressed his lips together for a moment. “You could work from here, too. If you wanted to.”

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t care about staying Leort. I’d still have to deal with Frederic, but that was a minor obstacle. Did Felix truly believe I’d choose to live apart from him, now that he had given me an opportunity at Truthhold? I released my grip on the blanket that was all that covered me, loving the way his eyes drank me in. “Why would I want to stay here, when I could live and work in an enchanted castle?”

Felix shoved his trousers back down his legs. “Is the magic all you are interested in?”

I took a step back. “The food is pretty good, too. Though I suppose that is because of the magic.”

“The food,” he drawled, following me. “Anything else?”

“The clocks. I thought they were a bit much at first, but I must admit it was convenient to always know the time.”

“Isa.”

“What else? Oh, right. There’s also a very contrary, sarcastic duke I’ve grown rather fond of. Especially now that he can’t get away with lying to me.”

Felix toppled me onto the bed, his hands knowing exactly what to do to drive me wild. “I think,” he said between kisses, “that I need to give you a few more reasons.”

FORTY-FIVE

FELIX



WHEN ISA AND I finally made it downstairs to eat breakfast, she informed me about her meeting with Chief Nassan. This led to an explanation of how she had lost her job while helping me and her guess that the princess had pressured the chief constable to rethink that decision.

It also led to Isa extracting a promise that I wouldn't come with her and share with the chief my opinion on his decisions. I had to content myself with visiting the Truthhold office in town. I wanted the paperwork out and waiting for Isa, in case I could convince her to sign and ride home with me today. She was convinced that her mentor among the constables would raise a fuss if she didn't handle things carefully.

I'd rather deal with the rumors—they'd fade eventually—and have her with me sooner.

"Are you certain you don't want to live at Rose Castle anymore?" I asked Berklay as he pulled out the appropriate forms.

"These past few months have shown me how much I was missing, living so far from the rest of my family. I think shifting from butler to the manager of the Leort offices is the right choice."

"I know it is the best choice for these offices, but I'll miss you. How am I going to find another butler comfortable with the idiosyncrasies of my home?"

"Louisa is perfectly suited to managing the secretaries, and George can oversee the few servants without my help. You don't need a butler with all your magic. I suspect Miss Cardh will also find ways to ensure everything runs smoothly."

I leaned against the desk. "How well do you know Isa?"

"I don't know her well, but I know plenty of her. My brother sees her as something of a daughter. He's always tried to look out for her, knowing

her own father wouldn't."

I sighed. "So I gathered. Do you think you can convince him that I mean her no harm?"

Berklay shook his head. "Frederic won't be convinced by anything I have to say. He makes up his own mind. If you want to change it, you'll have to do the convincing yourself."

"Can you at least give me a hint about what I can say to change his mind?"

"It isn't what you say that matters, Your Grace. It is your sincerity that will make the difference."

"Noted." I straightened. "Isa had a meeting with Chief Nassan this morning. I want to meet her when it ends. Where would they be?"

Berklay gave me directions to the main constabulary building, and I made my way through the streets of Leort. I could tell which people in town recognized me as I walked by—they always sized me up as if they could see at a glance if the rumors they had heard were true. I did my best to ignore their scrutiny. They'd have new gossip to spread about me and Isa soon.

Inside the constables' headquarters, I told the woman behind the desk that I was waiting for Isa. She informed me that her meeting hadn't concluded yet and directed me to wait in one of the chairs along the wall. She hadn't recognized me, nor asked my name, which was a bit of a relief.

Turning away from the desk, I noticed that there was another man waiting. Frederic Berklay.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, rising to his feet.

"Waiting for Isa."

He took a step forward, trying to loom over me. I was taller than him, so it didn't quite work. Still, I wasn't unaware that while he might be shorter, he also was wider than me, his mass made up primarily of muscle.

"I don't care if you are a duke. I won't let you mess with her anymore."

I kept my expression calm. "Are you threatening me, Constable?"

"Just telling you how it is. I know you are immune to the truth-telling enchantment at Truthhold. I'm not falling for your tricks."

"Being able to lie doesn't mean I did lie."

The front door opened and Frederic paused, waiting to see who had come in. I shifted my attention to the newcomer as well. She wasn't Isa. I

knew that at a glance, even before I had taken in the difference in hair styles. Apart from the hair, they looked exactly the same, but there was still a fundamental difference. I couldn't quite place it—perhaps the natural tilt of her lips or a softness in her gaze—but I knew I'd never mistake Isa for her twin.

“Miss Cardh,” I greeted her. She knew who I was, and she hesitated, clearly reluctant to tell me she wasn't Isa. I saved her the trouble. “Are you here to see your sister as well? Isa seems to be quite popular today.”

“I wanted to hear how her meeting went, Your Grace.” She looked between me and Frederic, clearly aware of the tension but wanting to ignore it. “I didn't realize you were in town. Isa didn't mention anything.”

“I arrived last night, surprising her.”

Sofia's eyes went wide, but Frederic began to splutter. “What's that supposed to mean?”

I turned back to the constable. “Exactly what I said.”

“Stop talking in riddles.”

“Why?” I tried to remember that this man's opinion mattered to Isa. I recalled Berklay's advice to be sincere. But what did it matter? Frederic had already made up his mind. “Even if I speak clearly, you'll assume I'm lying.”

Sofia stepped forward, not quite coming between us, but drawing the constable's attention. “Frederic, what is going on? Didn't Isa explain everything to you?”

The constable jabbed a finger in my direction. “He did something. Magicked her or something. She hasn't been acting herself ever since she went to Truthhold. She can only say what he wants her to.”

Sofia rested a hand on his arm. “If you don't believe Isa, and don't trust the duke, perhaps I can help.” She looked over at me. “With your permission, Your Grace, I can truth-tell you. That way, Frederic will know you aren't lying when you answer his questions.”

We were beyond the range of my node-tie, so in theory Sofia should be able to truth-tell me. But only if her power was greater than my own. I still had no sense of how much magic I had apart from the node, and couldn't guess at the likelihood in either direction. Still, I nodded. I'd tell the constable the truth whether I had to or not.

He scowled, but told Sofia to go ahead.

I watched the power stream out of her. It settled around me in a hazy mist, not quite touching me. Was that normal? Or was it a sign that her spell was too weak?

Frederic began asking the familiar questions, his manner growing more and more agitated as my answers didn't change from before.

The back door opened, and Isa stepped into the room. She frowned at the tableau in front of her, but didn't interrupt. Frederic spared her a single glance, then looked back at me. "What do you want with Isa now?"

Berklay's words came back to me. Be sincere. "I love her."

The blue mist faded, and Sofia beamed at me and Isa. The constable spluttered some more. Isa walked around him, punching his arm as she went by, and wrapped her arms around me. Then she looked back at her mentor. "Are you satisfied yet, Frederic?"

He couldn't seem to process the way we stood. It took him several heartbeats to answer. "You didn't mention anything like . . ." He gestured between us, but couldn't seem to say the words. "You claimed it was just work."

"It was. Nothing happened then. And I didn't mention my feelings because you had decided Felix had manipulated and bewitched me. If I had told you I was in love with him, you would have reacted even worse."

"I . . . I . . ."

She took pity on him, facing him, though she twined her fingers in mine at the same time. "I know you were worried about me, but I need you to trust me. Or at the very least, trust Sofia. She was truth-telling Felix while you questioned him, wasn't she? Are you going to claim she is bewitched, too?"

"Of course not," Frederic blustered. "And I trust you . . . but the duke . . ."

"Is not the villain, Frederic. If you trust me, then can't you be happy for me?"

His expression softened. "I'll try." Then he looked at me and became grim once more. His finger pointed at my chest. "If you do anything to hurt her—"

Isa slapped Frederic's finger down. "I can take care of myself, thank you very much."

I leaned forward and whispered in her ear, though not so quietly that the others wouldn't hear. "Let him have his say. You deserve to have

someone threaten me on your behalf.”

She laughed, and the last bit of fight drained out of the constable.

“Does this mean you won’t be taking your job back, Isa?”

“I never was. I told you I was ready for a position where my talents were respected. As it happens, I’ve found a new job that I think will suit me much better.”

It took a bit more reassurance, but soon Isa sent the constable on his way. Then she turned to her twin, her hands on her hips. “You were truth-telling Felix?”

Sofia grinned, the expression as impish as anything Isa could manage. “I was supposed to be, but only to reassure Frederic.”

“Supposed to be? So, it didn’t work?” I asked. “Wait, you knew it wasn’t working? Why didn’t you tell him?”

“He was being foolish. I knew you weren’t about to lie.”

I bowed. “Thank you, Miss Cardh.”

“Sofia,” she insisted. “I do believe you ought to call me Sofia under the circumstances.”

“I’m honored. Please, call me Felix.”

“All right,” Isa started moving toward the door. “Now that the introductions are done, and we’ve provided the receptionist with a show, let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

FORTY-SIX

FELIX



IN THE END, I had to return home by myself. Isa needed more time to prepare herself for a permanent shift, and I couldn't stay in Leort after one more night. I had argued that she could return with me, then deal with the rest later, but she insisted that it was better this way. If she took a day or two up front, she wouldn't have to travel back into town again. Not until she wanted to.

Hopefully, since I had issued Sofia—and Leo, whom I met over supper—an invitation to visit at any time, Isa wouldn't want to go back to Leort much at all. If her trips were infrequent, I could always go with her.

When I felt her cross the boundary, I didn't bother to pretend I had any patience. I met her halfway down the hill and she threw herself into my arms. A flick of my wrist sent her bags into the castle. She startled when a stable hand came to take the mare I had sent into town for her.

She laughed. "I'm not used to seeing people here."

"There aren't as many as before, but still enough that I am constantly surprised, too."

We walked hand in hand into the castle, and I led her upstairs.

"Am I in the same room as before, or have my quarters been shifted to upstairs with the staff?" she asked, eyes glittering with amusement.

"Neither. Because I want no one to doubt my ultimate intentions toward you, I've assigned you the northeast tower suite." I watched her struggle for words, then added. "Of course, in practice, I'd prefer if you shared my rooms."

"Felix?" She pursed her lips together. "Do the tower suites traditionally have names associated with them?"

"Indeed, they do. The northwest tower, naturally, is the Duke's Tower."

"And the northeast?"

“The Duchess’s.”

She swallowed.

I grinned. “There’s no rush. I simply wanted to make sure we understood each other. I’d hate for you to overlook something obvious.”

“I don’t think even I could miss a proposal. If you do it right.”

“I have every intention of doing it right. But I didn’t want you to wonder if one was coming. Once I am certain your answer won’t be that it is too soon, that is.”

Isa’s expression told me I had made the right decision. She wanted the reassurance of my intentions, but not the awkwardness of a proposal she would reject at this point. The challenge would be determining how long I needed to wait. I knew what I wanted, and that wouldn’t change even if I had to wait years.

I hoped she didn’t make me wait years.

Time to shift the tone of the conversation. I wrapped my hand around the doorknob leading to my—our—suite. “I did a little redecorating in anticipation of your arrival. Hopefully, you’ll like it.”

I pushed opened the door, then stepped aside, letting Isa walk in first. She took two steps in, then spun around to face me. “No.”

I followed her into the sitting room and closed the door. “You said the clocks grew on you.”

“There are eight clocks in here, Felix. No one wants eight clocks in a single room.”

“Nine,” I corrected with a smirk.

She spun back around. Counting the clocks once more, she shook her head. Then she pointed at the mahogany pendulum clock on the wall.

“That one can stay. The rest need to disappear, or I’m leaving.”

I sent the extra clocks into a storage room, still smiling. “I was only trying to give you reasons to appreciate moving out to Rose Castle.”

She slid her hands into my hair and pulled me down for a kiss. “I have the only reason I need.” She stepped back, and her eyes sparkled. “A job.”

I tugged her back against me. “A job which doesn’t start until tomorrow. I’ll have to do something else to keep you satisfied tonight.”

She hummed, and my clothes were suddenly in a pile on the floor. “I have a few ideas.”

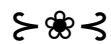
A quick tug on the node’s power and her clothes joined mine. I ran my hands down her back to cup her ass. “I love the way your mind works.”

She pressed a kiss to my chest, right over my heart. When she spoke, it was so quiet, I wasn't sure she meant for me to hear. "I missed you."

Hearing her say those words filled me with warmth. I kissed her, my desire softening from a fierce ache to an overwhelming need to hold Isa close. She wasn't the type to admit any vulnerabilities, and she'd see the admission as just that.

I didn't hesitate to share my own thoughts about the last few days. "I missed you, too. Every minute apart from you is torture. I love you, Isabel Cardh."

"I love you, Felix Truthholder."



Thank you for reading *Deceiving the Cursed Beast*. I hope you enjoyed it.

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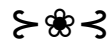
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A secret identity. A special shoe. And a kiss at midnight.



Princess Charmina knows her duty as the heir to the throne. But before the ball where she must choose her husband, she wants to experience life without the expectations of her title hanging over her. She wants to be just Mina. She soon discovers that life in an average village isn't as simple as she expected.

Alan doesn't know why the villagers turned against him, refusing to recognize his skills as a blacksmith. He is resigned to the situation. At least until Mina arrives and notices what the villagers miss. She is the first person in years to truly see him, and he begins to hope that his life could include not only happiness, but love.

But secrets have a way of ruining everything. How can Alan trust Mina when her entire identity was a lie?

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And readers, thank you for opening my book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jen Lynning never outgrew her love of fairy tales. (She may have studied German just so she could read the Brothers Grimm in the original.) When she wasn't reading about life in a magical world, she was imagining it. Eventually she decided to start writing her own stories where magic and romance meet.

Jen lives in Northern Virginia with her two cats, who make their own contributions to her writing by walking across the keyboard, and her bird, who offers commentary on the whole process.

Visit jenlynning.com to see what's coming next and sign up for Jen's newsletter. Newsletter subscribers will receive a free novella and short story.

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